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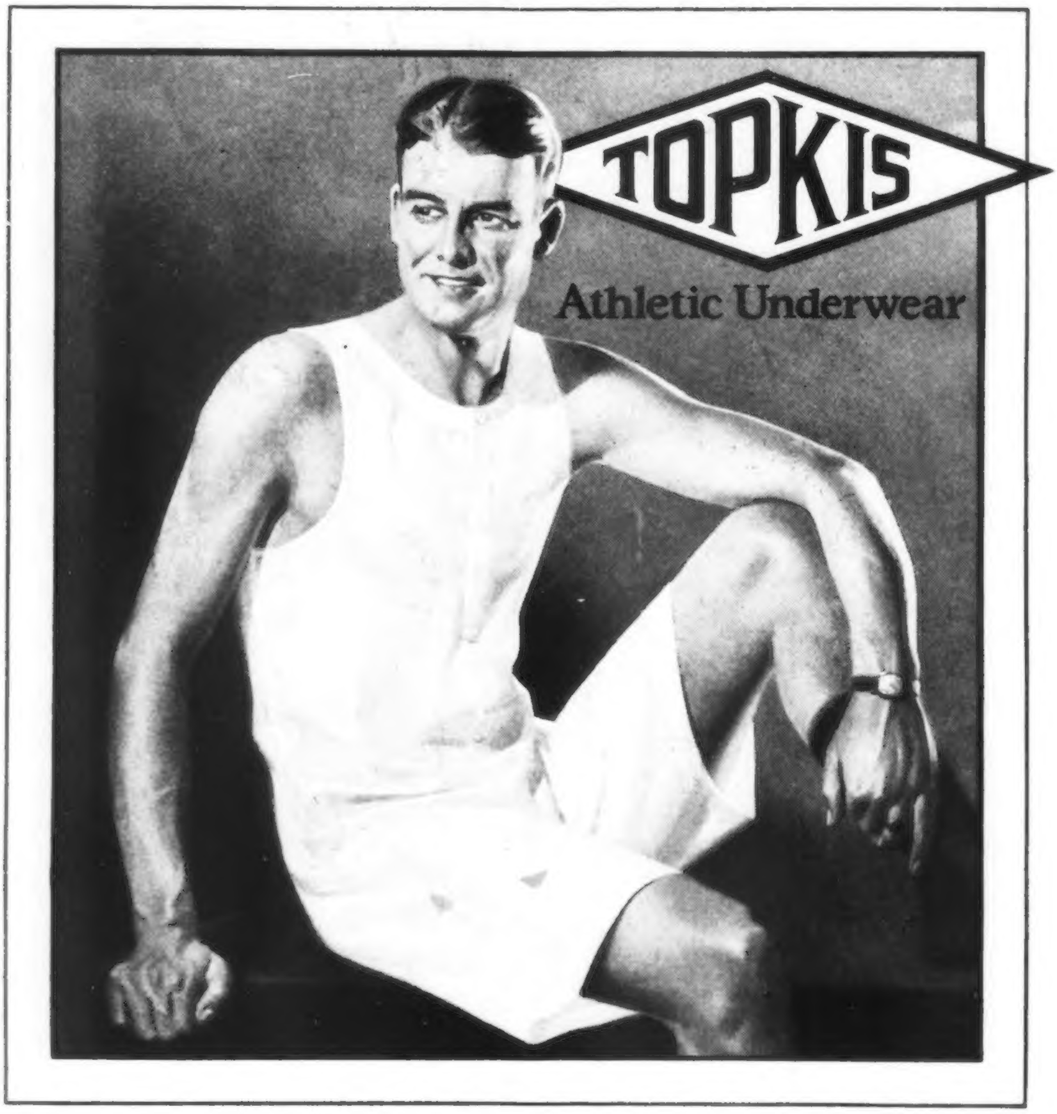

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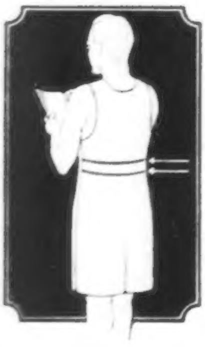

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May, 1927
Vol. LVI No. 5

Everybody's

OSCAR GRAEVE
Editor

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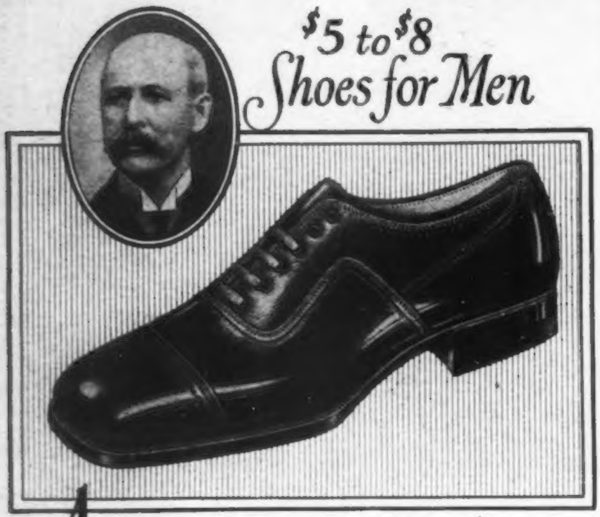

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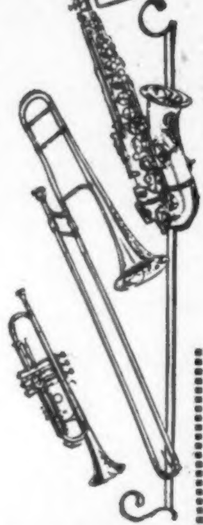

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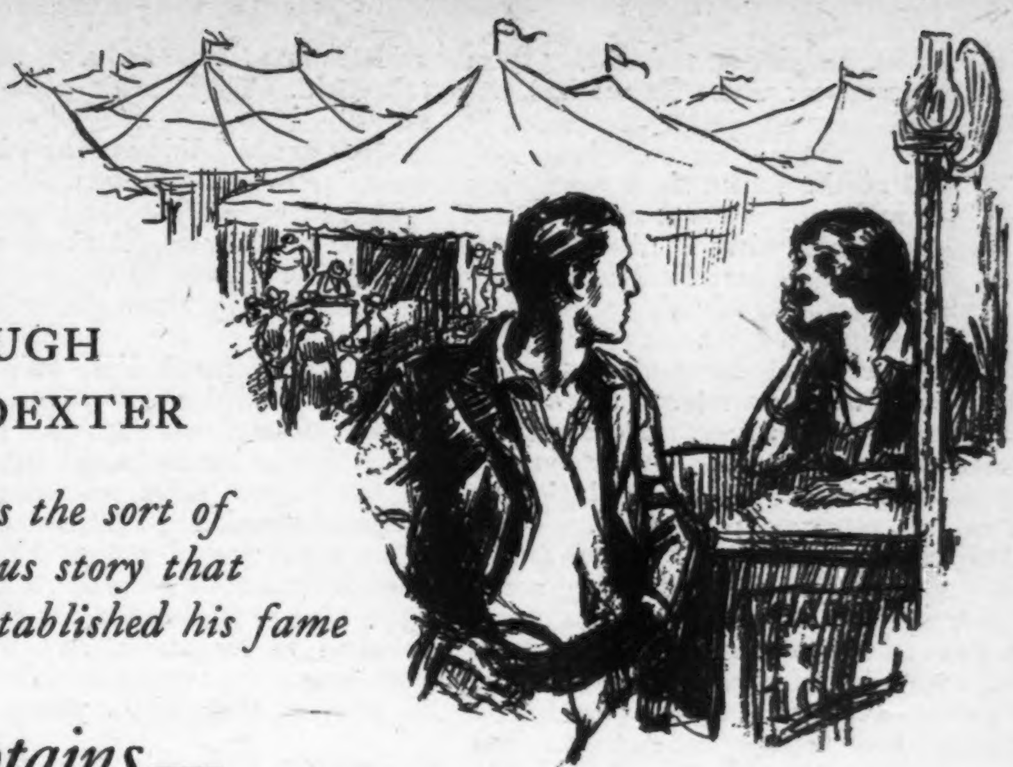

HUGH PENDEXTER

presents the sort of humorous story that first established his fame

Captains FUGACIOUS

AFTER two score years of sameness the Tupper County Horse and Cattle Show Association was compelled to choose between dying in the last ditch, and a new program of attractions. The forward step was taken, with the Pappam Universal and Oriental Shows receiving all but a few unimportant concessions.

In place of chaste posters of fat oxen contentedly hauling a drag of rocks, and of wall-eyed horses hitched to racing-gigs, was used Pappam's own idea of publicity. The landscape for miles was violently enlivened by Pappam's paper. In the old days a farm horse would have bolted and run himself off his legs after one glance at the Pappam-papered blacksmith shop. Pappam was especially strong on the Harem Dancing Beauties and the man-eating Numidian lion. These leered and glared, respectively, from every shed and barn. Several ancient men bought new clothing and trimmed neglected beards so as to be all set.

The arrival of a long train of huge, covered trucks brought the entire community of Tupper village to the roadside. The schoolmaster excitedly told his pupils they were beholding something very similar to the picture presented during the World War, when reenforcements were being rushed to a threatened front.

Then there was Pappam; a big man driving a small car. Even the auto and radio had not prepared the villagers for such effulgence, such supreme egotism, such hyperbole. He roared his lectures and dictations, but seldom conversed. Within thirty minutes after his arrival he had the president of the association running errands. The roarings subsided to rumblings once he was satisfied the few independent concessions would not compete with his Water Circus, Dancing Girls, three rides, and a dozen or more side-shows. He gave the impression that, although satisfied, folks better be careful.

For the first time in the history of the County Fair a large number paid to enter the grounds the day before the opening. The covered trucks were the attractions. There would be so much to see when these were unloaded. After watching the trucks disgorge their freight of beauty and freaks some declared Pappam was keeping many of his performers under cover until the morrow. All such were credulous souls, who did not appreciate the veteran showman's

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capacity for doubling-up and making three performers appear where Nature had created one.

TWO of the independent concessions were directly across the tented street from the Carnival of Oriental Beauty and Nature Terpsichore Redivivus. Captain Sharpe, guesser of weights, had one. Lithuel Hodgecomb, the captain's friend, had the other, a shooting-gallery. Captain Sharpe wore two big revolvers to furnish atmosphere for the gallery. His own props consisted of a set of scales, understood only by himself, and a table piled high with boxes of not expensive candy. Young Hodgecomb worked hard that first day in erecting the bullet-proof back-stop, across which a string of cast-iron ducks would move in an endless procession. Perhaps his was the only square game on the grounds. He even refused Captain Sharpe's offer to "tinker" with the sights of the guns. But he was not a veteran trouper. Although he labored incessantly until his booth was completed he often darted an anxious, expectant glance at the tightly drawn flaps of the Carnival of Beauty.

Late afternoon the captain joined him and asked, "What's that 'Redivivus' mean?"

"Brought to life again. Restored." The information was given absentmindedly. "All of Pappam's people with him, same as at the Rochester fair?"

"Yeah. Blacksmith feller was telling that word 'Redivivus' is the name of something that used to grow out back of his father's barn and was worse'n poison-ivy."

"I haven't seen Captain Gold."

"You're a lucky young dog. Of all the ranting four-flushers that old bird—"

"Don't. Please."

"But I wasn't knocking his granddaughter. Ain't seen hide nor hair of her either. Probably quit the show. Hope it's clear tomorrow."

The opening day was ideal for county fairs; clear and not too warm. Captain Sharpe, sprightly and erect, despite his years, had rearranged his hill of sweets and guessed a woman's weight within five pounds (his leeway was ten) before Hodgecomb put in an appearance.

"Fine time to be away," grumbled the captain. "Run your stand half a dollar's worth, then had to 'tend to my guessing. Look after your business."

"Been into town. Got a glimpse of Captain Gold. They didn't come with the shows."

"He's one bird I'd never miss if he never come," growled the captain.

Hodgecomb stiffened and stared enraptured. Then he said, "Ain't she wonderful, Pop?" He referred to the young woman entering the ticket-cage of the Carnival of Beauty.

"All right enough if it wa'n't for her grandpap and his funny medals. Ten pounds of super-candy against a dime she'll weight in at a hundred and thirty-six."

"Can't you think of anything but weight?" complained Hodgecomb.

"If you'd worked in the Chicago stock-yards till you could guess the weight of anything alive you'd find the gift clung." He returned to his scales, and Hodgecomb loaded a gun for a customer and reverted to his idolizing study of the young woman.

HE FIRST saw her at the Rochester fair and had established a speaking acquaintance. She was the granddaughter of Captain Gold, who lectured for the Pappam side-shows (ballyhoo, in the vernacular of the wagons) and who was a show in himself when he told the story of his life, limited to two minutes. His shifting audiences learned the many badges and medals covering the front of his coat were so many recognitions of daring deeds. At eighty-one his step was buoyant, except when he forgot and turned quickly.

But the granddaughter was perfection. Doubtless the guesser of weights had estimated cannily, for there were no flapper lines in her plump figure. She wore flimsy black, which accentuated the creamy white of her splendid arms and neck. The touch of color in the round cheeks could not be washed off. Her eyes were large and dark and dreamy, and her unbobbed hair was the hue of the raven's wing. If the Tupper fair had not been dying Hodgecomb might never have seen her again; for he was a diffident chap. She saw him and nodded amiably. He believed he was facing his last opportunity, for the Pappam shows would begin working south. As soon as the Carnival filled up for its first performance and the girl had a bit of leisure he crossed to the ticket-cage and greeted:

"Awfully glad to see you again Miss Gold."

She turned down the corner of the thin blue-covered book and shook his hand through the small opening and remarked, "The young ploughman again, making hay again."

She continued surveying him leisurely, yet critically. The cage being elevated his face was framed in the opening of the iron grill-work. They had met but once at the Rochester fair.

He knew he must say something. "Small change for a two, Miss Gold?"

"Dimes and nickels for a two-spot," she mechanically murmured. He was no trouper, but he was nice. She was convinced of that. On meeting her gaze his eyes had fluttered like a bird with a broken wing. Road-shows were thin soil for modesty. As her strong white fingers slowly pushed forward the change she lazily remarked, "Gitting ready for a rush, huh? You haven't taken in any paper yet to speak of."

"Good land, Miss Josie!" This was tremendously daring and unpremeditated. "You've got sharp eyes."

SHE turned to watch the diver on the ninety-foot platform transmute himself into a streak of gold that ended in the Water-Circus tank; and then reminded, "The two-spot?"

He was overwhelmed. "You must think I'm a sharper, or an idiot," he confusedly said as he fished out the paper money and thrust it through the opening. He *was* a nice boy.

"I never make change until my mitt's on the bill unless I know a party's all right," she assured. It was a novel and pleasing experience to find a male creature who needed encouragement. "What do you do winters? You said something t'other time about farming."

"Never supposed you'd remember that. I shall finish up some special work at the state agricultural school," he explained.

Her white brows were perplexed into tiny wrinkles for a moment. "What's the idea? Does one have to go to school to be a farmer. I thought they grew, just like crops."

"I shall run a dairy farm." He knew it was a hopeless subject to talk over with a road-show divinity. He would have retreated, but she was saying:

"Huh. Hens. Cows. Eggs. Cheese. Butter. You'd have to add a bee to make it exciting."

He was flung back to the ice-age. "I'm thinking of something livelier," he desperately replied.

"What?"

Ah, there was the rub. He endeavored to think of "what." Her red lips (not lipsticked) twitched as she watched him in his mental floundering. Impulsively she patted the sunbrowned hand resting on the window-shelf and told him, "Stick to hens, cows, eggs, cheese, and a bee for excitement. Trouping won't git you much of much. Grandpap and me are following the swallows south with the wagons this winter. Maybe our last trip. Grandpap is gitting too old to troup much longer."

"A wonderful man. Young and upstanding—"

"Hi! hi! What's the matter here? Ain't your change right? What you kicking about?" This was roared in a heavy bass and seemed to shake the firmament.

Hodgecomb convulsively twisted about and confronted the towering, flamboyant figure of Pappam. The florid face was darkling. Like an anæmic fish the younger man opened his mouth, but could think of nothing to say.

Miss Gold softly informed the proprietor. "That's enough and a plenty, Mr. Pappam. When I need help in making change, or in handling a kicker, I'll set fire to the Water-Circus. When you see it blazing you come on the jump."

Hodgecomb once saw in a trick movie a stately castle crumble to dust. He was reminded of that prankish bit of photography as Pappam appeared to shrink and collapse. The man was inarticulate. His mouth opened and closed with gasping sounds. Then he was mumbling. "All right. Can't have any one bothering our Josie."

With that he turned back to the stage as the first show ended. The strident booming of his powerful voice drew a fresh audience toward the long platform. Houris from South Boston and way stations lined up behind him. Miss Jessie excused the flustered young man by saying, "Any time you need change, ask me." Then she was expertly busy in pushing bits of pasteboard through the small opening, the firm white fingers closing over the money before the tickets were released. Pappam was wont to boast that her first glance and touch could detect a bogus bill or coin, let the counterfeit be ever so clever.

BACK at his gallery Hodgecomb believed his head was spinning like a top. He had been humiliated and he was furious. He was superbly happy. A rare stew of emotions. He apologized for handing out an empty gun, and the great joy in his face left the customer puzzled. He was automatic in catering to the trade. When the shooting fell off he was glad.

Surreptitiously studying Miss Josie was vastly more profitable than selling ten shots for a quarter. He had time to admire his daring in calling her by her first name. Some sympathetic angel, who must have lived through the delights of earth, was twanging a glorious harp over his head.

His progress was not stupendous to be sure. Nor so tangible as the white iron ducks futilely swimming across the background of the gallery. Yet great results were built up from minutiæ. His schooling had taught him that. Eliza had crossed the Ohio by utilizing such shifting, treacherous hunks of ice as had escaped the photographed tongs of Red Grange. It was a synthetic ecstasy to vision her in a dairy: immaculate, creamy white, with sleeves rolled high on the splendid arms.

Three young men and their girl companions secured his attention and thrust money upon him. Nearby the captain was telling the world of his willingness to back his talent with a two-pound box against a measly dime. When his business threatened to wane he revived it by handing out a box of candy with clamorous publicity. Did one keep tabs on these decoys he would observe the winners invariably were little boys, or girls, or a woman whose appearance suggested but small experience with the sweets of life.

At the end of the first afternoon all concessions, except the eating booths, enjoyed a rest period until the evening fireworks and free vaudeville should bring the people back. Pappam was busy pocketing the "takes" at his various attractions. Members of the vaudeville acts hurried to the Midway to renew acquaintance. The males invariably headed for Miss Josie. Some had met her at summer parks, street carnivals, and fairs. Others were seeking her for the first time.

The manager of a Jap balancing and barrel-spinning act breezed along just as Pappam was at liberty to return to the Carnival of Beauty tent. The manager was telling the girl how good he was, and how he was to manage a far, far bigger'n better act on the southern loop, when Pappam came up. The vaporous boastings of the manager in Pappam's presence was like a flood victim bragging to Noah how high water drowned him when it swept away the bridge at Skowhegan. Finished with his rag of a cigar Pappam broke loose and with derisive language did the man great violence. The bellowing voice brought one of the Siamese twins and the legless wonder to tent openings to see what was "biting the old man."

MISS JOSIE registered disgust by walking out on the scene. Carrying her thin blue book she crossed to where Captain Sharpe and young Hodgecomb were cleaning rifles. Without any preamble she said, "Grandpap and me would like to have you two slip on the feedbag with us if you ain't got other plans?"

Hodgecomb snapped a rifle hammer down on his thumb and did not know it. His eyes babbled fatuitous things while his tongue was petrified. The captain suavely accepted the invitation for both, and learned the feed-bags were waiting even then in Pappam's small dining-tent. Pretty bits of sentiment, with the feed-bag motif, such as "a jug of wine and thou," filled the young man's mouth when the lady was half-way to the tent.

Hodgecomb hurriedly washed and crawled under the counter where he had his bunk, and surpassed all veteran sleeping-car addicts by his celerity in changing to a new shirt, collar and tie. On emerging he suggested to the captain that the big revolvers be left behind.

"But I like the feel of them," protested the captain. "Empty, of course. But I don't feel dressed without them. Used to wear and depend on them so much."

"Better tell them they are unloaded."

"Who?"

"The revolvers."

The captain smiled reminiscently and said, "Never such a dabster as I was back in the good old days when a man's life depended on his quickness on the draw. They needn't feel scared. I'll tell them they're empty."

Hodgecomb would prefer his old friend went unaccoutered. He had great respect for the part the captain had played in winning the West, but he feared the ordnance would make Miss Josie nervous. She never batted an eye, however, as she and her bemedaled grandfather welcomed the two at the entrance of the tent. Once inside, and realizing he was in Pappam's home, Hodgecomb felt uneasy. He feared lest Pappam might arrive and give him the gate with much *brusquerie*.

At that moment Pappam was down the line, profanely teaching a new man how to combine ordinary snakes with peroxide of hydrogen, plus a pinch of aniline dyes. The result would leave all serpent-scientists clinging to the ropes. Captain Gold threatened to be a damper on the party. He was inclined to keep up-stage once he had lamped Captain Sharpe's artillery. Under the impelling eye of his granddaughter he made a gesture toward courtesy by asking, "Are the Hatfields out ag'in?"

Either Captain Sharpe missed the innuendo, or was above noticing it. The files of medals parading across the old man's chest always whetted his curiosity. He asked respectful questions. Captain Gold forgave the guns and did his stuff.

THE two guests were early and Hodgecomb was eager to make the most of the golden opportunity. The thin blue book gave him his entrance cue; and he remarked, "Reading, Miss Josie?"

". . . and the Chicago fire never would 'a' happened if they'd listened to me. I got this medal, shaped like a torch, for giving the warning. . . ." This from Captain Gold, like the chorus in "Œdipus Tyrannus."

"Just brushing up on my manners," explained Miss Josie. Her frankness was like sunshine, and was only one of her adorable qualities. She motioned him to sit beside her, and continued, "I don't plan to follow the wagons all my life. You're a college man—"

"Agricultural school."

"Well, you've stuck in one place long enough to learn something. I've met oceans of folks, mostly yaps. You've seen folks outside of fairs and carnivals. Now is this right, page forty-one and the picture. Says a lady shouldn't rise when a gent's introduced. Just mitt him without raring up. Sounds fishy."

". . . who put Jenny Lind across and got this medal from P. T. himself."

"I believe that is the correct form, Miss Josie," said Hodgecomb.

"Makes a girl look like she was up-stage. The 'better'n you be' kind," criticized Miss Josie.

"Not neighborly. Surely not," stoutly agreed Hodgecomb. "But one must take the world as he finds it."

". . . with the left-hand gun, and bagged two devils with the right quicker'n you can say scat," explained Captain Sharpe in the background, and apparently going to bat for the first time.

"There are styles in deportment as in dress," gravely said Hodgecomb.

"If you ain't filled with Simon-pure language," softly admired Miss Josie. "I'll swallow anything, hook, bait and sinker, except this about not standing on your hoofs when a proper gent is knocked-down to you. Well, well. Queer world, ain't it. But we didn't make it."

". . . and General Walker said, 'Colonel Gold, take this and wear it. If you die it shall be buried with you.' "

Miss Josie frowned slightly and with a sigh said, "Grandpap's off the reservation again. Trouping gives a slant on life you never git in any other way. The poet was right when he wrote, 'Life is hard.' "

" 'Life is real, life is earnest,' " murmured Hodgecomb.

"You're correcting me?" gently asked Miss Josie.

"Good land! Such a notion. No."

"Sounds's if you was," she suspiciously insisted. "Your way of putting it is all right for a night-letter, or a wire sent collect. But, prepaid, you can boil it to three words. I think I'd love poetry. I was exposed to it when a kid, but not long enough for it to take. Yet I picked up a lot of verses and wise cracks. Never a truer saying than that a burnt child gathers no moss."

". . . Damnation! Didn't Fremont up and say there never would 'a' been any Californy if not for me'? Didn't Congress give me this medal?"

Miss Josie switched her gaze to the two men, now standing too close to each other, chins out, eyes glaring. She wearily commented, "No runs. No hits. Two errors."

"It's Captain Sharpe's fault, I know. I'll quiet him," murmured Hodgecomb.

HE WAS spared the task by the abrupt entrance of Pappam, who came bellowing, and followed by his performers. Pounding a huge fist on the table he requested all the high gods to make a memo of the fact that the new snake-man couldn't even glue horns on the "Devil Serpent" so's they'd stick. Captain Gold's lecturing voice became a weak maundering. Captain Sharpe held his arms so as to cover his two guns. Pappam took time to glare at the two guests, and Hodgecomb felt much embarrassed. Miss Josie was the perfect hostess, however. Before Pappam could outrage the laws of hospitality she was quietly saying:

"If you'll leave the snakes outside with the bull and be seated I'll pour you a cup of tea."

Again a phenomenon: a craggy mountain swiftly dissolving into a hatful of ashes. Pappam dropped heavily into a camp-chair, and while waiting for tea surveyed Hodgecomb gloomily and demanded, "What's your name?"

"Hodgecomb. Lithuel Hodgecomb."

"My Gawd! What you doing this winter?"

"I'm thinking of touring the South with a sharpshooting act."

"He's joshing," languidly informed Miss Josie. "He's going to tuck himself away in a school for farmer lads and go in for 'Way Down East' stuff. Cows. Butter. Hens. Eggs. And a bee or two."

Pappam's big face softened slowly. He even smiled a trifle. He warmly said that did he have his life to live over he never, never would play the fairs and parks, but would become one of Nature's noblemen, as there wa'n't nothing so noble as farming.

There followed an enthusiastic clatter of knives and forks, and all but young Hodgecomb were engrossed with food: for Pappam did himself well at feed-bag time. The young man made his supper of tea, largely; just for the pleasure of beholding Miss Josie's grace in pouring. As the dessert was being served Pappam received a hurry call to see what was the matter with the Numidian lion. Once he had blasphemed an exit the two captains resumed their claims on glory. Their wrangling interposed a screen between the young couple at the head of the table and the troupers. Hodgecomb asked:

"Miss Josie, why did you tell Mr. Pappam I was going to school?"

"Are going to school," she corrected.

"Darn school. I beg your pardon. But I'm nifty with a rifle. I could go along with Mr. Pappam—"

"No. That's out. Your duty is to Mrs. Alma Mater."

"Good land! Can't I ever see you again?"

Here was undreamed boldness. He was amazed at himself. He was submerged in ecstatic cataclysms; then he feared, and was overwhelmed in ebony engulfings. He felt as a futurist landscape looks; or as winter must feel when it slides out of the lap of spring. Without premeditation he had risked all on that query. He stared, and held his breath. Would it be a reprieve, or thumbs down? Storms of delirious hope filled his shapely head as he beheld Miss Josie smiling. It was not the ordinary sort of a smile, but the kind that tells something. The dark eyes were in league with the red lips. Hodgecomb was content to gaze and gloat. Cold reason was trying to tell him a fast worker might clinch the business then and there. And as he day-dreamed the train struck the open switch and left the iron.

The two captains were on their feet, leaning across the board and wagging their ancient heads insultingly. "By Godfrey!" shouted Miss Josie's grandfather. "When a man up and tells me no medal was given to Captain Gold for running guns into Cuba to arm the poor blacks against their savage masters, then it's high time I told that man he's a liar!"

"Judas criminity!" exploded Captain Sharpe. "You old wind-bag! You dare call a veteran of the western plains a liar? Who spent years where a man's life hinged each hour of every day on the quickness of his trigger-finger!"

"You don't know which end of a gun to take hold of." And Captain Gold laughed in harsh derision.

"You'll next be telling how Wayne Wheeler give you a special medal for bootlegging."

BUT now Hodgecomb was on his feet and was ending the disgraceful scene by running his friend from the tent and across to the shooting-gallery. Not until then did he speak, and then to demand, miserably, "Why did you have to jaw with Captain Gold?"

"That unlimited old ass would gag a maggot," heatedly replied Captain Sharpe. "Ha! ha! Said Congress give him a medal for gun-running. And then 'broke the die' so there could never be another like it! Ha! ha!"

"The granddaughter," groaned Hodgecomb.

"Told how it was him, not Grant, that got Lee to surrender!" passionately continued the captain.

"But the granddaughter, Miss Josie."

The repetition, the hopeless tone in which it was couched, impinged on the captain's brain. He emerged from his brain-storm and gazed questioningly into the young man's face. What he read there caused his eyes to soften, and to ask, "You're a fool over that gal?"

"I've seen my last sunset." And he turned to the counter of target rifles.

"You young idiot! You couldn't any more'n part your hair with one of them guns." And he clamped a hand on Hodge's shoulder.

"I never thought of that. As far as breathing and circulation of the blood goes I must keep on living. But outside of that, time and earth have passed away."

Captain Sharpe slapped his back sympathetically, and softly condoled, "Don't I know it? Didn't I go through the same sickness over the first gal? That dis'pointment sent me west to be a scourge to the Injuns and bad-men. But there's one good thing about it. It's like the measles. If you have it hard you won't have it again."

Hodgecomb, his head sagging, stumbled away from him. Now alarm was blended with the captain's pity. Swallowing convulsively he hurried after him and surrendered, saying, "All right. You win. I won't gum your game. I'll make it up with the old fool. I'll let him walk over me. —— him!"

But Hodgecomb was convinced the mischief was done. The girl loved her lying old grandfather too much to have any truck with one she must consider to be the protégé of Captain Sharpe. He shook off his friend's hand, and hurried away to wander somberly and aimlessly among the tents. He took no heed of his going until aroused by two revolver shots, fired almost together. Then a roaring voice was bawling, "Why don't you lay down, —— you!" And another shot.

HODGECOMB had fallen from zenith to nadir, yet he retained the capacity for being shocked by brutal murder. He halted before the tightly drawn flaps of the man-eating lion's tent just as Pappam suddenly emerged, mopping his brow and cursing under his breath.

"Who's dead?" asked Hodgecomb.

"I be, almost," growled Pappam. "Fool trainer don't know enough to take care of Baby. Baby's starting a bad spell. Wouldn't flop over and play dead lion when the gun was fired. Trainer got scared. Had to send for me. He'll be all right tomorrow."

"Trainer?" hopefully asked Hodgecomb.

"—— no! He'll never be right. I'm speaking of Baby. What'd I care about a trainer? Been showing him how to work Baby; but his head's made of pianner keys."

As there was no murder Hodgecomb was at liberty to return to his misery. He wandered blindly and it was dusk when he took account of his location and found himself in the rear of a street of tents. He knew it was poor form to be prowling around the backs of tents, being larcenous and sneaky in appearance. He hurried between two walls of canvas and almost bumped into Captain Gold. The captain, recognizing him, promptly blocked his path and wrathfully said:

"That grandpap of yours is a tarnation fool."

"No blood relation. Just a friend," muttered Hodgecomb.

"That's worse. You can't help your relations," denounced the captain. "That old coot had th' nerve to tell me he used to shoot buttons off'n Wild Bill's coat, and Bill just smiled meechingly, and didn't dare to object."

"He's said to be a master hand with guns," feebly defended Hodgecomb.

"Ever see him do any fancy shooting?" challenged the captain.

"No. But he was in the West for years. Shoots like a streak."

"Ba! Spills enough hot air to sweat an Eskimo."

"But you saw his two big guns!"

Captain Gold snorted his disdain, and countered, "And I've got a rope. S'pose that means I can step out and do a Will Rogers."

"Oh, I have no wish to make you feel harsh towards me, Captain Gold. I'm sorry Captain Sharpe talked as he did. I have great respect for your granddaughter. The greatest respect man ever felt, and—"

"Halt! Not passed by the board of censors, young man. You keep clear of my graddaughter. We Golds are as clannish as a boiled-dinner. Enemy to one is enemy to the whole tribe. And you look too meeching, anyway." He passed on, his medals clinking and clanking because of indignation, or jerky steps.

When Hodgecomb retired that night, under the counter of the shooting-gallery, his dreams were of the creamy white and so desirable Miss Josie. They were separated by an illimitable, dreamy plain, over which swept a mournful wind. Across the depressing expanse two skeletal old men wrangled and fought, one clothed with clinking medals, and the other thickly hung with big revolvers. He was nerve-worn and disheartened when he turned out early in the morning.

CAPTAIN Sharpe was waiting to go to breakfast. He appeared to be in high spirits. The day's possible profits were filling his cogitations. He greeted his melancholy young friend by saying, "Give me a run of women. That's all I ask. Guess 'em too low and they're glad to let it go at that. Never'll ask for the candy. These new styles, women without hips, is a godsend to the honest guesser. But a man ain't got that kind of pride. Not even if he weighs a ton."

"You haven't seen him this morning?"

"Who?"

"Captain Gold."

"That old four-flusher? God forbid. Say. Lithuel, I'd ask nothing better than to have time plop backwards to the first year of Deadwood, or Benton, and have that false alarm on the scene. Mighty few medals he'd be wearing after the first two minutes in town. Such days! Ha! Ha! How we'd shoot cigars out the mouths of the tenderfeet! Scuffed off a bit of hide on one chap and made his lip bleed. Lawd, what a row we had before t'other chap would admit I'd won the bet."

"Why can't you take credit for what you've done, and let him take credit for what he's done?" wearily asked Hodgecomb.

"Who?"

"Captain Gold."

"Still harping on that old cuss? He ain't worth a thought. When a toy balloon busts, that's old Gold. Medal for saving Captain Webb from drowning when he was swimming down the Mississippi! Yeow! I'm going to hunt that echo up and bet him he can't keep afloat in the Water-Circus tank for half a minute. I'll dare him before a crowd—"

"No, no! Good heavens, what would she think!"

"Who?"

"Miss Josie, of course."

"Oh! Yes, she'd be likely enough if she didn't belong to the wrong family. Her grandpap poisons several generations—Hamburg steak, fried onions and pertaters, coffee'n rolls." The last was to the cook.

"I don't care two cents about her grandfather," fiercely said Hodgecomb. "Coffee and doughnuts, Cook."

"There! I knew we was sharing the same thought," warmly declared Captain Sharpe.

"But I'll never forget her," added Hodgecomb.

"Who?"

"Good heavens! Miss Josie. What's the matter with your head, Captain?"

"Well, ain't it the truth. And ain't it queer," commented the Captain. "And when you're at the calf age. Don't I know it! The first one I fell for had a cast in her eye. In one eye. Left. But to me it was just a bit of roguishness. She married a barber and beat him up with a chair. The doctor said she'd a killed him if her left eye had been all right."

"Miss Josie is a gentlewoman," Hodgecomb coldly reminded.

"*I* like her," enthusiastically said the captain. "She'll weigh exactly a hundred and thirty-six, or I never killed the leader of the Tuell gang in front of the Two Spot saloon at a measured distance of one hundred and ten yards, army Colt, forty-four."

HODGECOMB moodily finished his coffee and doughnuts and returned to the shooting-gallery. Bits of song, an argument as to the superiority of two rival radio sets, and rough badinage emanated from the brown mounds of canvas. The Siamese twins were making the most of their brief freedom by passing ball in the mid-way. The Tattooed Man, sitting in front of his tent, was critically inspecting his person and deftly retouching any indelible designs which had blurred overnight.

The only dissonance was the bellowing of Pappam, now at the lion tent. He was hoarsely warning, "If you fall down on Baby's act today you've got the whole world to wander in." There must have been an attempt at defense as the raucous voice of the proprietor angrily shouted:

"Clawed at you, you poor cheese? What you expect? That Baby's going to bake you a cake? Baby's clawed and scratched better men than you'll ever be. Of course Baby claws at you. That's his act. It's your cue to act scared and jump and fire the gun, and yell 'Down!' I've told you that so much I've got corns on my tongue. What's the use of training Baby to act up like a man-eater if he don't show any spunk? Put it across today, or start walking."

Then Pappam came up the street to the Carnival tent and entered the ticket-cage. He appeared to Hodgecomb, across the way, like a gorilla too tightly confined. He was a cacophonic gorilla intruding where grace and beauty and goodness should be presiding. Hodgecomb watched him surreptiously, and wondered if he were to sell tickets. That would mean the Golds were quitting the shows. The thought filled his bosom with leaden weights. He knew it would be like her, with her striving for correct deportment, to steal away before daybreak. The young man began to entertain something akin to aversion toward Captain Sharpe.

Then, like a streak of sunshine piercing a Dore illustration in the family Bible, there appeared between the flaps of the big tent Captain Gold and his wealth of medals. He emerged and descended from the platform and stood in front of the ticket-cage.

Pappam beamed upon him and reached a big hand through the opening and patted the narrow shoulders. The two talked in undertones. Hodgecomb waited anxiously until the old man should gaze in his direction. It would be ludicrously cruel did Captain Gold hold him in any way responsible for Captain Sharpe's rudeness. At last the captain turned his head and stared across the street. His eyes rested on the young man and contained the impersonal malice of a basilisk. Then he was looking elsewhere, as if in search of something better.

Hodgecomb's attention was attracted by a snorting sound behind him. Captain Sharpe was staring malevolently over his shoulder. Not satisfied with glaring the captain loudly said, "Got a medal for trying to stop Nero from fiddling Rome into the flames. Ha! Ha! Another medal for showing Moses the trail through the Wilderness."

"Oh, will you hush?" begged Hodgecomb.

Captain Gold ever wore a naked sword. He climbed to the ballyhoo platform and in his shrill, penetrating voice announced, "Lay-dees and gen'l'men. We have with us the most famous pistol-shot in Tupper Corners. With an unloaded gun he killed ALL the Injuns who killed Custer. With a loaded gun he WON the World War-r!"

"By Judas! He can't git away with that!" bellowed Captain Sharpe. And he would have rushed to attack the medalist forthwith had not Hodgecomb thrown his arms around him. The medals jangled and clinked and would have advanced to battle had not creamy white arms shot from between the flaps to draw him inside the tent.

IT WAS finished. Hodgecomb accepted the decree and turned to his gallery. Men must work though the harbor bar be moaning. The potentials of a completed agricultural course were in the groups of people now sifting down the midway. While waiting for patronage he sought anodyne in canvassing possible names for the dairy-farm. That genius was burgeoning in his young head was proved by his refusal to follow the vogue established by the first purveyor of milk. He would have naught of "Riverside," "Brookdale" or "Mountain Springs." All such cursed hintings at watered milk did violence to Hodgecomb's sensibilities. These stock names, printed across the front of a barn were reminiscent of a wrong-doer, who babbles guilty secrets in his sleep. Even the "Rocky Falls Farm" betrayed the egotism of the subconscious, or the small boy in the man impelling him to boast how he "got away with it." Hodgecomb took this resolute stand when he attended his first

Milkmen's Convention and heard the members' sing, *Shall We Gather At The River?*

This close-up of Hodgecomb's moral fiber is necessary to an appreciation of his seriousness in approaching any worth while problem. Also, it more clearly reveals his capacity for suffering. He "felt like hell." Those were his words to Captain Sharpe after War's grim visage was yanked from the mid-way by splendid arms. Had he been less virile he might have said "hades," or gloomed about "wallowing in an abyss of woe." He spoke forcefully, but with no thought of inelegance. A listening neighbor, one who knew the family, might have thought the young man was throwing-back to Grandfather Hodgecomb, who could give any man a three-minute verbal start and beat him to the tape by a profane sprint.

After brooding for half an hour Captain Sharpe abandoned business to join his friend and say, "See here, Lithuel. It's come to me like a flash that you're sweet on that gal; and really mean it."

"Good heavens!"

"Well, well," mused Sharpe. "That's different. S'posed it was just another case of the first one. I want to help you, now I understand. If that silly fakir will let me alone I'll let him alone. That'll fix things."

IT FIXED nothing. When Miss Josie succeeded Pappam in the ticket-cage she did not know Hodgecomb was alive. Being the biggest day of the fair all attractions were prospering most robustly. It was neither the time, nor the place, for corroding cark.

Manning the guns should have been joy to Hodgecomb. He was peeved and physically weary. After the noon hour the crush was greater than ever, and the gallery profits were far above the apogee of all expectations. The heart behind the works remained bankrupt.

Ceasing his search for a dairy-farm name Hodgecomb could only think of Time's inexorableness. One day more and the Pappam shows would be following the swallows. There was the frog who lived in the bottom of a well and finally tired of it and climbed upward three feet a day and slipped back one foot, much to the enrichment of all elementary arithmetics. There arrived the moment when the young man discovered he disliked living in a well. In other words he became desperate. History is cluttered up with instances where the pushed-about and trampled-upon suddenly turn and become stars in forlorn hopes. Hodgecomb suddenly decided he could not be any worse off if he charged across to the ticket-cage and sought speech with the marble-orbed one. Once he resolved to make this essay latent cunning was eager to aid him. The mid-way crowd would thin out when the starter called for his horses in the two-twenty trot at two o'clock. Hodgecomb knew he must be off the mark at the beginning of the lull, and before Miss Josie had time to retire.

He peddled rifles and kept an ear aslant to the race-track. At last it came, the blare of the band in front of the judges stand. There was a backward surge in the happy throng. The withdrawl became a wild retreat. Before he was scarcely conscious of his ultimate daring Hodgecomb was at the ticket-cage, staring up into Miss Josie's cold eyes and babbling the dire need of small change. With a downward sweep of her long lashes, as quick and sharp as a Pinkerton's glance, she noted the bulging, sagging pockets. He was carrying enough weight to drown him if he should fall into the Water-Circus tank. The law of the troupers, however, called for cooperation, and she began counting out dimes and nickels, with her right hand ready to receive the bank-notes. All the paper money Lithuel could find was a dollar bill.

"I'm sorry," he faltered.

"No bother to make change," she quietly assured him. As she advanced a dollar in nickles and dimes Pappam emerged from the big tent. Miss Josie promptly retired. Hodgecomb retreated. Adamant and Bessemer steel: women can be like that, the young man was discovering.

TRADE was falling off along the whole street. A few tents down the line Captain Gold was endeavoring to stem the ebbing tide with promises of a rare combat between Man and Lion; or, as the captain embroidered it, "Hu*man* courage and hu*man* brains against the terrible ferocity of the *Be-e-est* World." And all for a dime, the tenth part of a dollar. The morbid expectation of beholding a Numidian four-footer chew up a white man decoyed a fair-sized audience into the side-show.

Hodgecomb was still nursing soul-bruises when Captain Sharpe came to the gallery, two heavy guns sagging at his hips and commenced prattling about his afternoon "take." Hodgecomb did not hear him. He was despairingly gazing after Miss Josie now leaving the big tent and making toward the lion tent.

"Every fat woman said I was right. Wouldn't even have me check up on the scales. Next year I'm going to give weight-certificates and charge a dime extra. If I'd had some this afternoon I could a took twenty dollars more—"

A WOMAN'S shriek, so shrill and piercing as to rise high above the medley of noises left the captain's boast unfinished, and sent Hodgecomb leaping into the street. The one scream became a chorus. Hodgecomb darted quick glances at the three rides, one being the "Flying Boats." Two rides were resting, and a third was almost empty. The deep notes of men afraid was added to the terrified chorus. People were running away from the lion tent. Hodgecomb started down the mid-way with the captain at his heels. He was in time to see the lion tent spew forth the last of the fear-crazed spectators. Now those endeavoring to get away from the tent were being hemmed in by an onrush of the curious from the race-track. Then the lion stalked into view, and all were facing henceward in the twinkling of a good eye.

"Captain! The lion's loose!" yelled Hodgecomb; and he stayed his steps and glanced right and left for an egress between the tents.

Captain Sharpe barked hoarsely. There was so much screaming and shouting, so much of frantic endeavor to get clear of the danger-zone, and such persistence on the part of those arriving from the race-track to crowd down the street and see what it was all about, that the captain's outcry went unheeded by Hodgecomb.

Then he glimpsed her, Miss Josie, within fifteen feet of the lion. Miss Josie's mouth was opening and closing, but so great was the din none could hear her screaming. It was plain she had lost her senses for she was deliberately approaching Baby, whose mouth was stretched to the utmost as he shook his shaggy head and bared his big teeth and made an inventory of the free feed.

WITH a plunge and a leap Hodgecomb advanced and nearly knocked her off her feet as he threw his two arms around her. She was a good hundred and thirty-six, but love and fear can transform pygmies into giants.

Baby's roar was thunderous and he crouched for a spring as Hodgecomb turned with the girl to run between two tents. He expected to feel the claws and jaws; instead he heard the booming of Captain Sharpe's big guns. Hodgecomb tripped over a guy-rope and stumbled and all but fell.

"He's dead! He's killed him!" cried the frantic people, hedged in close to the lion by the new arrivals.

A backward glance revealed a dramatic tableau. Captain Sharpe, erect and masterful, was blowing the smoke from the two long gun barrels. Baby was stretched out on the ground.

"Oh, he's killed Baby!" whimpered Miss Josie, clutching Hodgecomb more tightly about the neck as she glared over his shoulder.

"Thank God!" choked her rescuer. But he would not risk her being trampled upon by the wildly surging currents of humanity. He gained the rear of the tents and carried her to the Carnival of Beauty tent. Even then he would have held her indefinitely had she not slipped to the ground, her face hotly suffused with blushes.

"You dared to come to me in the face of that lion," she murmured, as they stood alone at the back of the big tent. "You done that, believing him to be dangerous." And she shyly looked into his eyes and smiled gently.

"Deadly," he faintly corrected, now feeling faint.

"You'd face a mad Numidian lion for me?" she whispered.

"Why, Miss Josie! What a silly question! Who wouldn't?"

"Well no one else did, Luthiel."

"Lithuel," he mechanically corrected. His heart aching with happiness now that he understood what man-eating lions were created for.

"Lithuel, I'm tired of trouping. I've got a goodish bit saved up. I've always hankered for a little farm, covered with flowers. A dairy-farm. Where there's room for Grandpap and his medals—"

"Miss Josie! Josie! Sweetheart! I have the farm—" he incoherently broke in.

"And Pappam shows signs of taking to drink." Now she was picking invisible lint from his coat. "I want a home and keep a bee and grow honey." She paused and waited, but he gaped like a stranded fish. "I could learn to love a nice young man who's studied farming."

"Josie! I love your grandfather. Will you marry me now?"

"After you've had this winter's schooling, and I've kept my contract with Pappam. After that, if you'll promise never to make me go to a county fair . . ." She glanced swiftly about. All the world was on the mid-way. "In the spring, yes, Luthiel. And you may kiss me once to make the contract binding." This time he recked not his miscalled name.

WHEN he asked, "At just what particular moment did you know you loved me? When I first picked you up or—"

"When you came to get change and had only one dollar in paper. Come." She smoothed her hair and led the way around to the ticket-cage and mounted the long narrow stage. A huge mob was slowly working toward the big tent and was cheering most lustily. "Praising Captain Sharpe for his courage and deadly marksmanship," murmured Hodgecomb.

Her beautiful eyes saddened. Her voice was unsteady as she said, "I tried so hard to make Baby hear me. Hear me telling him to lay down. If I could only have gotten to him, made him hear!" She paused and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

"There's the Captain!" proudly exclaimed Hodgcombe; and there was hero worship in his gaze as he looked down on his friend, moving slowly with many hands clapping his shoulders, and many voices proclaiming his bravery and skill.

Captain Sharpe was in high feather. He was reloading his guns, carried empty until this momentous afternoon. He glimpsed Hodgecomb and Miss Josie and waved a forty-four in salutation without interrupting his story as to how he killed the man-eater.

"There was death in his eyes. There was death in my guns," he told the close-packed throng. "There was no chance for fine shooting as I'd liked. Lives were at stake. The first bullet was mortal, but once my guns git to barking they don't know when to stop. Look that man-eater over and you'll find every shot was mortal."

Loud cheers greeted his words, and the swirling crowd swept him on up the midway.

"A wonderful man with lethal weapons," solemnly commented Hodgecomb.

MISS JOSIE was sniveling, but she nodded acquiescence. A new audience was madly cheering the Pride of the West. A man shouted that the people were taking him to the judge's stand, so he might be presented to all the people.

Then Pappam came up the street; and he was laughing. He walked with head thrown back and bumped into people. His laughter reached to high heaven. Miss Josie forgot her tears as she saw and heard him. "The poor man's crazy!" she told Hodgecomb. "He loved Baby. He's crazy's a coot."

Pappam was sane enough to recognize Miss Josie. He commenced a frown as he recognized her companion. Then his mad mirth returned. He was bellowing as he forced a path to the platform; and tears were rolling down his face.

"Don't! Please don't take on so, Chief," sobbed Miss Josie.

"It's all for the best," mumbled Hodgecomb.

Leaning against the side of the ticket-cage from very weakness he brokenly told them, "Missed! At ten feet he missed! Twelve shots! Missed every—one!" And again he was convulsed by strident risibles.

Miss Josie was quicker than Hodgecomb in comprehending the miracle. She clapped her hands with joy. "Oh, now everything is all right. Everything is perfect. I tried to make Baby hear. He took his cue to lay down from the captain's gun. The cute thing!"

Young Hodgecomb emerged from his stupor to say, "Then there was no danger. You didn't need my help."

Pappam was overcome again and could not answer him. Miss Josie was quick to reply. "No danger except from the old man's guns. But you're just as much of a dear. You showed you was willing to risk anything for your girl. Our bargain holds. Contract's signed. Luthiel and me are to be married in the spring, Chief."

"Lithuel, dearest," he corrected.

A Former Member of the Royal Flying Corps Offers an Exhilarating Flying Story

For the Good of the SERVICE

By JACK YEAMAN

"WELL, the first part of the job's done," exclaimed Ned Capper, dropping into a chair beside the desk in the inner office of the Department of Justice quarters at San Antonio.

"Did they tie the can to you?" asked Spotford White, narcotic chief from Washington.

"I'll say they did," the boy replied, grinning ruefully. "Major Brightman told me I was 'washed out' 'for the good of the service.' You know what that means. Under ordinary circumstances I could never hold another job of any kind with the Government.

"He told me that the Air Service had no use for men like me; that after the Government had spent nearly $150,000 on my training I had disgraced myself and my fellow cadets by acting the disgraceful fool, and all that."

"Well, did you?"

"I'll say so. I've pretended to be drunk for the past two weeks. Missed classes, made a mess of my flying and talked back to my instructors every chance I got."

"Then no one has the slightest suspicion that you were framing the deal?"

"Not a chance. If you could have heard Major Brightman lecture me about the standards of the Air Service and the duty I owed my country you would have thought he was in earnest, all right."

The white-haired narcotic chief smiled.

"Fine work, Capper. But that's only part of your job. Now you have to get in with Lanks. That may not prove so easy as fooling the army."

"That's just about fixed, too," the boy answered, a broad smile lighting his fine-featured, dark face. "I've been going on parties with some of his men since I started my campaign to get kicked out of the Air Service training school. Met Lanks himself the other night and told him a good story about what a rotten deal I was getting from the service. He knows my record; that I'm supposed to be the star flyer in the graduating class, and all that bunk, and jumped at the opening. He told me that any time I was out of a job to drop around and see him."

"Then we're ready to start our campaign," White said, characteristically not wasting any more words on praise. "Get a job with Lanks as quickly as possible. The rest will about take care of itself. You know the general outline of the proposition.

"We are convinced that Lanks is the head of the transportation end of the big dope-running syndicate that's bringing the stuff over from Mexico. We are certain that he's shipping it in by air. But so far, as you know, we haven't been able to catch one of his planes. That's why we asked you to help us—on advice from Washington that you could be trusted. Your job is to get in with him as the pilot of one of his dope-running planes and keep us advised of your movements and where you will be delivering the stuff. Then we can be on hand and trace down the distributing organization.

"The arrangements are simple enough. You will call the department's unlisted phone number as soon as you find out when you are leaving on a trip. A girl will answer—either a secretary or one of the stenographers. Address whoever answers as Dorothy, or Dotty. She'll understand. Then pretend that she is a girl friend of yours whom you had an engagement with and tell her that you have to break it as you are going out of town. That will advise us that you are on your way.

"I will give you a number of special aerial message tubes. They are small and can be concealed about your person. On your return trip from Mexico with a load, when you will know your destination, drop a message in one of the tubes either over Falfurrias or Alice. We will have agents at both places. Upon hitting the ground the tubes ignite a red flare and are easily found.

"The success of this attempt to break up the most damnable trade in the world is in your hands from now on. We can't do a thing but sit quiet and wait. You mustn't try to get in touch with us except through 'Dorothy' to let us know when you are going on a trip.

"Tomorrow I'll make one more move to get you in strong with Lanks. We'll have you framed at O'Reilly Field for the theft of some of your classmates' belongings and issue a warrant for you. That will make Lanks think he has another hold on you and give you an excuse for staying in hiding at his field where you can watch developments.

"You had better be on your way now. It wouldn't do to be seen with any of us or even around this building."

Capper rose and shook hands seriously.

"I'll certainly do my best, sir," he said, "and all I ask is that I be reinstated in the Air Service when I've finished this job."

ON HIS way back to the hotel where he had left his belongings after being almost literally kicked out of O'Reilly Flying Field, Capper bought an evening paper and glanced idly over the news of the many army camps about the great southwestern training center.

One of the headlines stopped him short in his tracks.

Flying Cadet Dismissed for Good of the Service.

He cursed softly as he read the short account of his being "washed out."

"Lord," he commented. "That sure brands me. And I can't say a word in reply."

At the hotel he went immediately to the elevators, not caring to meet any of his former friends who might be in the lobby. But a voice halted him before he could escape.

"Hy there, Capper, who bit you?" the speaker, a heavy-set middle-aged man demanded, as he hurried over to the boy.

"Oh, hello, Lanks," Capper greeted him listlessly. "Come to congratulate me on the good news, I suppose?"

Lanks' thin, tight lips parted in what was meant for a smile, but which only hardened his cold, calculating features.

"No need to cry, aviator," he said coolly. "As all you high flyers know, there's a silver lining to every cloud."

"Like hell," Capper replied. Then with sudden desire in his eyes: "Got a drink on you?"

"That's the stuff," Lanks, who was owner of a civilian flying field near the city, said. "Helps you forget all your troubles. Sure I have some. Let's go up to your room and take a shot."

The suspected dope runner watched the young flyer as he gulped down two large shots of the raw corn liquor which he had furnished; watched carefully and smiled again in his thin, cold way.

"Nice deal they gave you, wasn't it, flyer?" he questioned.

"To hell with them," Capper exploded, his dark eyes flaming vindictively. "Kicked me out for the good of their damned service," he continued, drinking and talking, cursing his former friends and service. But he subsided as suddenly as he had started and said quietly:

"Hell, what's the use of talking that way? What can I do? They've branded me. I won't even be able to get a job where I'm known. I'll be busy from now on just keeping alive."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Lanks said softly, his eyes never leaving the boy's face. "Remember I spoke to you the other day about maybe needing a good pilot who had guts and wasn't too particular about where he did his flying?"

"You mean," Capper said slowly, swaying slightly as he poured himself another drink, "that you'd give me, cursed and damned as I am, a job with your outfit? Don't kid me, big boy."

"I'm not kidding you," Lanks replied coldly. "You can fly. I've made sure of that. And I reckon you wouldn't refuse a chance to make good money for mighty little work, huh?"

"Are you serious, Lanks?" Ned demanded. "You'll really give me a job flying?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," Lanks replied. "And, what's more, I'll fix you up a place at the field so you won't have to be meeting your Air Service friends. It might be a good idea for them not to know that you are working for me."

The boy swayed in his seat and his eyes clouded. "That's sure fine of you, Lanks, mighty fine. When do I start?"

They arranged pay and other details, until finally Lanks rose to go.

"Pile your stuff into a taxi at five in the morning," he directed. "Have the driver take you to the S. P. station and drop you there. One of my men will be waiting for you in a closed car to take you to the field. No one will be the wiser."

Capper staggered as he rose to bid Lanks good-by. For the first time he asked the nature of the flying he would have to do.

"Never mind that," Lanks answered. "You'll find out soon enough."

AFTER he left, Ned crossed his room and stood before the mirror again. "Wasn't so hard to land a job, after all," he told his reflection, and a smile, almost as cold and hard as Lanks', twisted his lips. Suddenly he went to the telephone and called a number.

"Hello, Dotty?" he asked. "This is Ned Capper. Uh, huh— No, can't see you tonight, sorry. You see," and he emphasized the words: "I just got a job— Thanks. See you soon. Good-by."

Everything went as planned the next morning, but when he arrived at the aerodrome, Lanks wasn't there. One of the field's civilian pilots was expecting him, however, and took him immediately to a room built against the rear of one of the hangars.

"This will be your dump," he said. "Not very fancy, but then, you won't be here all the time."

"Why?" Capper asked. "I thought that we did most of our flying right here on this field; carrying passengers, instructing students, and stuff like that."

"Oh, you'll have some of that to do," the other answered. "But you and I are the boss' stars. We'll be—" he stopped, regarding Capper suspiciously. "Never mind," he ended lamely. "Guess the boss'll tell you what your job is when he returns."

Capper hung around the aerodrome for two days, occasionally carrying a passenger who wanted a joy hop and was willing to pay three dollars to risk his life in an old-fashioned, worn-out plane.

The boy's first interest had naturally been in the planes that the field boasted. The ones that were kept "on the line" for the benefit of people bent on a new experience and for the instruction of a few civilian students were of a common type designed before the war. Most of them were nearly worn out and it disgusted the former army pilot, used to the Air Service's trim, efficient "ships," to see them flown.

But there was one plane on the field, in the rear of one of the hangars, which aroused entirely different emotions. Its every line spoke of speed, maneuverability and strength. Climbing over it, examining every feature, the young pilot was amazed to find that the rear cockpit was fitted with what was unquestionably a swivel machine-gun mounting, concealed from casual view. Unlike the army turret gun mounting, which extends all the way round the cockpit in plain sight, this one was a single tube socket mounting which folded down and back under the rim of the fusilage, and rotated from one side to the other of the ship on a concealed runway. Trying it out, Capper found that it could be raised and set immediately in any position about the turret with two spring bracing arms which fitted into slots on the mounting's runway.

The fuel capacity also surprised him. Enough gasoline, the boy figured, to keep the ship, with its one hundred and eighty horsepower Hispano-Suiza motor, in the air for almost eight hours.

After going over every inch of the plane from propeller to rudder, Ned returned to the rear cockpit for a further examination of the machine-gun mounting. Ducking his head under the cowling he was studying the mechanism when the appearance of the side walls attracted his attention. He judged that they must be at least six inches thick, or, and the thought made him study them more closely, there was a concealed cabinet in each one. He tapped them and they echoed hollowly. After a hasty examination he estimated that the two cabinets were probably five inches wide, three feet long and three feet deep each. Quite a storehouse for certain kinds of extremely valuable merchandise. But he couldn't discover the way to open them.

AS HE straightened up from his examination he looked into Lanks' cold eyes less than a foot from his own.

"What do you think of my bird?" his employer asked softly.

"A beauty," the boy answered. "Why don't you put her on the line? It would be great advertising."

"Sometimes it doesn't pay to advertise," Lanks answered. Then, changing the subject, "So you think you'd like her, huh? Fine, You can have a chance to fly it this afternoon."

"Where do I go?" the boy asked.

"Never mind that," Lanks said sharply, his manner changing. "You'll get your orders when you take off. Your job here is to do as you're told and not ask questions. For a fellow kicked out of the army 'for the good of the service' you're damned nosey."

"Look here Lanks," the boy exclaimed, starting toward his employer with clenched fists and flushed face, "I—"

"Just a second, big boy," the other cut in sharply. "Maybe you won't be so damned cocky and sensitive when I tell you the latest." He paused to give his words effect while the boy hesitated, his face still red with anger. "There's a warrant out for your arrest for stealing money and jewelry from the quarters of some of your former friends."

"It's a damn lie," Capper exclaimed impulsively. "You—"

"Know nothing," Lanks interrupted. "You'd stand a fine chance telling that to the judge, with your record."

Suddenly he put his hands on the boy's shoulders and drew him closer until their faces were only inches apart.

"You'll play my game now, mister, with no questions asked. One peep out of you and—" he drew a forefinger across his throat suggestively. "Now beat it to your quarters."

The boy stood for a moment as if stunned, and then dropping his eyes turned away and hurried to his room. Lanks watched him go, the thin, bitter smile disfiguring his face again.

"I guess he'll be good now," he muttered.

But Lanks might not have been so sure if he had seen the boy's expression or read his thoughts when he reached the seclusion of his room. "Developing as smooth as clockwork," the boy whispered to himself, smiling grimly.

At four-thirty one of the mechanics came to his door.

"Grab your stuff," he ordered. "The boss says snap into it. The old crate's warmed up and ready to go."

Jumping from his bed Ned snatched up his helmet, goggles and coveralls and followed the man, first stuffing a short, brass tube, which he drew from under his pillow, into one of his pockets.

THE thunder of a motor being warmed up roared through the hangar. A quick look around showed him an apparently deserted field except for one plane—the mystery ship of the morning—poised glistening on the line, the propeller turning lazily as the mechanic retarded the throttle.

Lanks and a stranger were standing beside the ship as he came on the field, and the boy saw them pass a machine gun to a mechanic in the rear cockpit.

"Come over and meet Mr. Seidaman," Lanks called when he saw Ned. "He's your passenger, and—" significantly, "your boss when you are away from this field."

Capper examined the stranger from head to foot as they shook hands. He was lightly built, medium complexion, handsome in a reckless, small-featured way. His bright, quick eyes passed over the boy like probing lances. Ned classed him as a central European type, a stew of nationalities; intelligent, resourceful, daring; often fearless and either a flaming, impractical dreamer, or a dangerously unscrupulous crook, depending upon which way life flipped the cards.

Lanks showed Ned a small map of the border country.

"You fly just a little south of east from here," he instructed, "and cross the border about twenty miles southeast of Laredo."

He stopped and looked keenly at the boy.

"Across the border," Ned exclaimed. "So that's it, eh? Well, damned if I care. Shoot the works."

"That's the stuff," Lanks approved. "I knew you'd do. You cross the river just about over Zatapa, and cross high, too; around ten thousand with your motor throttled so they won't be so likely to see you. Mr. Seidaman will direct you from there on."

THE trip across the border was uneventful and they landed at an isolated ranch nearly a hundred miles south of Laredo just before sundown.

Only one incident out of the ordinary occurred. Shortly after they had landed Seidaman spoke sharply to Ned in Spanish. The boy shook his head, plainly not understanding.

Apparently this angered Seidaman who launched into an abusive sounding tirade against Capper in the strange tongue. Ned regarded him with amazement. One of the Mexicans who had gathered about the plane cursed softly. The other laughed boisterously.

Seidaman stopped as suddenly as he had begun.

"If you knew what I'd been calling you you'd want to kill me, kid," he said genially. "Just testing you out to make sure you didn't savvy the lingo. If you had you sure would have shown it."

Later that night, lying on a rough cot under a window which opened on the ranch house's patio, Ned listened intently to the conversation of Seidaman and some of the Mexicans.

"Who says it doesn't pay to know how to play poker?" he said to himself. "But Lord, it was sure hard to stand there and take that fellow's cussing without showing I understood."

As he listened he made occasional notes on a piece of paper and smiled grimly as the party grew more boisterous and boastful.

THEY started the return trip shortly after sunup the next morning. Ned had seen nothing loaded on the plane but felt certain that the secret cabinets in the rear cockpit were loaded with deadly opiates.

Veering slightly from the course that Seidaman had indicated he flew over the little town of Falfurrias and, calling Seidaman's attention to a large buzzard wheeling above them to the left, he dropped a small tube over the right-hand side of the fusilage.

A few minutes later he smiled contentedly as he saw a tiny red flame appear on the ground behind them.

After nearly five hours of continuous flying he landed a few miles outside of a small town in the northern part of Texas. A large touring car waited on the field which Seidaman had pointed out.

"Shut off the motor, go over to the road and yell if you see any cars coming," Seidaman instructed Ned, as soon as the plane rolled to a stop. "These men have brought some gasoline with them and we'll put it in the tanks while you watch."

Ned snapped the switches off and strolled to the road about fifty yards from the plane. As he leaned over the fence watching, he stole a glance at the men. They were pouring the contents of two five-gallon gasoline cans into the wing tanks. When that job was finished they gathered about the rear cockpit and Seidaman climbed inside, bending down out of sight in the fusilage. Soon he reappeared and began passing the men thin brown packages which they stowed in the back of their car as fast as they received them. The transfer of the entire load took only a few minutes.

Ned smiled as he resumed his survey of the road. He admired the perfection of the ring's plans. They hired pilots like himself, either criminals, or for some other reasons willing to do questionable flying and ask no questions. Yet they took no chances of their pilots learning their plans, and at the same time protected the flyers. Ned could truthfully tell any questioners that he had merely flown a passenger to

Mexico on a visit; that he had seen nothing loaded on the plane, and (if he had followed instructions exactly) had seen nothing unloaded when he had flown his passenger to north Texas to meet some more of his friends.

Seidaman recalled the boy sharply from his vigil. The strangers were already driving away. No other car had appeared, apparently no one had seen the transfer. "Back to San Antonio," he directed, after starting the motor. And two hours later they were rolling the plane into the hangar at Lanks' Field.

IT WAS over a week before Ned was asked to make another trip. Lanks sent for him to report to his office.

"You're making the trip tonight," he said. "Feeling O. K.?"

"Damn," Ned replied irrelevantly. "I had a hot date tonight. Girl was coming for me in her car. Guess I can postpone it, though."

He picked up the telephone on Lanks' desk without asking permission and called a number.

"Is Dotty there?" he asked when it was given to him. "Hello, Dotty?— This is Ned Capper— Say, I'm awfully sorry, but I won't be able to keep my date tonight—but I can't help it, Dot, I have to go out of town, honest—but listen, Dot. You know—"

Lanks grinned as he listened to the boy's confused apologies.

Ned, who had expected that this flight would start the same time as the first one, was surprised when one of the mechanics called him from his siesta shortly after noon.

"You're leaving at two-thirty today," he he informed the pilot. "Everything's all set and the boss's waiting."

Uncertain what to do, as he had no further instructions from White, Ned picked up his gear and followed the man to the line where the big ship waited as before. Once again he saw Lanks and Seidaman fitting the machine gun into place.

The flight to the Mexican ranch was as uneventful as the first one. They were met by the same men and as before Ned was conducted to his room and told to stay there until they left in the morning. This time, however, there was no gathering in the patio and Ned fell asleep early, having no one to listen to.

BACK at Lanks' Field one of the mechanics answered the telephone about an hour after Ned had left and grinned as a woman's tense, excited voice asked for the pilot.

"He ain't here," the mechanic informed her. "Left long ago."

"Left!" the woman at the other end of the line exclaimed. "You mean he has flown off on his trip already?"

The mechanic grinned spitefully. Lanks had told him about Ned's difficulty in breaking a date with his girl.

"Naw," he said. "He went in town to see some girl of his, I reckon. But won't I do?"

He grinned again as the receiver at the other end was slammed up.

"Guess that'll hold her," he commented. "And won't high hat Capper have a lot of explaining to do when he sees that dame next time?"

But the girl at the other end of the line seemed greatly pleased at the news of Ned's supposed date "with a girl in town." After slamming down the receiver on the fresh mechanic's conversation, she turned to the man who stood beside her.

"Had an awful scare for a moment, Mr. White," she explained. "I thought that your plans had been spoiled. The man I was talking to said that Capper left a long time ago. I supposed he meant on the flight. But he says Capper is in town with some girl. So that's all right. But it does seem funny that he should take a chance on coming in. He wouldn't risk seeing us, that's certain."

"I don't blame him for getting restless," Mr. White replied. "He's done mighty well staying on the job as long as he has. But now for business.

"Thanks to the message which Capper dropped over Falfurrias on his last trip we had our men on the job when the plane landed in north Texas and delivered its cargo.

"Following the distributers from there we were able to trace down the entire ring. The only ones we still have to catch red-handed are Seidaman and Capper's relief pilot who is flying on today's trip. We have all the evidence on the rest and the warrants are all issued and will be served tomorrow morning after we are sure the plane has left on the return trip from Mexico. That's so there won't be any possibility of Seidaman being tipped off.

"The raids will be made simultaneously. It will be a complete clean-up as the Mexican authorities are gathering in the members of the ring across the border. But I must be going. Major Brightman is expecting me at O'Reilly Field in a few moments. He is going to cooperate with me in catching the dope plane."

TWENTY minutes later he was in Major Brightman's private office. Three pilots from the field's service squadron were also present.

"Everything is set," Mr. White started, plunging directly into his subject. "The dope plane will probably leave the Mexican ranch at daylight. It should be above the border an hour later. If you will have these gentlemen above the line at that time; one over Laredo, one twenty miles up the river and one twenty miles down, I'm certain you will pick it up. I would suggest that you fly at about ten thousand feet altitude and fifteen miles in from the border.

When the plane is sighted try to let it get past you without your being seen. The man who sights it will of course radio the others who will close in. Follow the ship and try to force it to the ground before it can get back to Mexico. Of course, if possible, we would like those men alive with their cargo, but we must have the cargo anyway. I'll leave ways and means to you, but I suggest that you land at Laredo after dark this evening and then you can take your positions first thing in the morning."

"Do you gentlemen understand?" Major Brightman asked the pilots. They nodded. "Then pick out your own observers," he continued. "All details are in your hands, Captain Clark."

"One more thing," the big narcotic chief said, as the officers were leaving. "As I told Major Brightman when we first discussed this case, that plane carries a machine gun. So of course you are prepared for any eventualities." The officers smiled. "I don't know much about the pilot," White continued, "but I have discovered that this man Seidaman is a crack aerial machine gunner. He served with the Austrian Air Corps as an observer during the war. So don't take any chances on his getting a good shot at you. The most important thing is to put a stop to their activities."

WHEN the pilots had left, White turned to Major Brightman seriously.

"About young Capper?" he asked. "Were you able to fix that up with the War Department?"

"Yes," the major replied. "His regular commission will be through soon. He passed his examinations three months ago, you know. The thing I feel the worst about is that talk I gave him when I kicked him out. It must have hurt him terribly. But he certainly played his part well. Not a man on the field except myself dreams that it wasn't perfectly regular. And naturally even I didn't know the truth until you told me last week."

"Getting him in was the only way we could break up the gang," White said. "It was impossible to trace their planes otherwise and not arouse suspicion among the ground bunch and scare them off. Capper agreed to get himself kicked out of the army dishonorably and at the same time get in well with Lanks. He succeeded even better than I thought he would."

As White was leaving, Major Brightman pointed toward the field where three planes of a new type were "warming up."

"There they are," he said. "They'll be off in a minute. I wouldn't like to be either Seidaman or his pilot if your ex-Austrian observer gets too frisky with his machine gun. Those boys can sure shoot."

The federal narcotic agents struck early the next morning. One group, headed by White personally, gathered in Lanks and his helpers at the aviation field. Other groups arrested the big distributers and many of the small peddlers in the northern part of the state and in many cities throughout the Middle West.

White, the chief, having worked out all of the details of the coup, and knowing that they would be carried out efficiently without him, had stayed in San Antonio to be as close as possible to the acting of the final scene—the capturing of the dope ship. He had accompanied his men to Lanks' Field just to keep busy, but developments there suddenly threw him into the thick of the play.

With two of his men he was talking to Lanks in the dope runner's office. Outside a government plane waited to take him to the scene of the dope ship's capture the moment word came from the flyers at the border.

Lanks was slumped forward in his chair, beaten. White had outlined the extent of the coup and the dope runner knew that his game was over. White had just finished telling him of the plans for capturing the dope plane.

"By the way," he asked suddenly, "where is Capper?"

"Capper!" Lanks exclaimed, jerking erect. "Thought you knew every detail of our organization; every move we have made. Why, the kid's flying the dope plane."

"What?" White paled. "Capper flying the dope plane? Don't lie to me, man."

"What the hell difference does it make who's flying the ship?" Lanks demanded, suspicion blazing in his eyes.

White didn't answer but ordered one of his men to take Lanks away. The minute they were out of the room, the chief, his face gray, sprang to the telephone.

"O'Reilly Field, quick," he barked.

In a moment he had Major Brightman on the wire.

"Capper's flying the dope plane," he exploded. "Good God, man, do you know what that means?— Can't we stop your ships some way?— That's true. Lord, they're probably at it right now, and that dope-running, dope fiend, Seidaman, in the back cockpit— You'll start immediately?— Good. So will I."

He slammed up the receiver and rushed from the hangar to the waiting plane. In five minutes he was hurtling south over the mesquite in a desperate effort to save Capper. At the same time Major Brightman was leaving O'Reilly Field on the same mission. Both men felt that they would be too late. They were certain that their mission would be useless, for it was already past the time that the dope ship should have been intercepted and forced down.

THE sun was just topping the desert rim as Ned climbed into the front cockpit for the return trip with the dope plane. After testing the controls he opened the petcocks from the wing gasoline tanks and primed the cylinders.

"Switches off, gas on," Seidaman called from in front where he was waiting to swing the propeller.

"Off and on," Ned answered automatically.

Seidaman swung the big propeller around twice, and setting himself, called:

"Contact!"

"Contact," Ned answered, snapping up the switches.

The little dope runner swung hard as Ned wound the booster and the motor roared into action. Ned ran it up slowly. They had a long trip ahead and he wanted to be certain that the engine was in perfect shape. Satisfied, he pulled back the throttle and waved to the Mexican boy to remove the rocks, which had been holding the straining plane back, from under the wheels. Then he strapped himself in and pulling his goggles over his eyes, turned around to Seidaman.

"All set?"

Seidaman, his eyes gleaming through his goggles, nodded and waved toward the north.

"Same course as last time as far as San Antonio," he shouted. "I'll direct you again from there."

AS NED flew north, idly scanning the ground below, he wondered why he had received no orders for dropping a message. When he had called "Dotty" to tell her that their "date" was off as he was going on a trip, thus giving her the information that he was making another flight with the dope plane, she had given him no orders, only saying that she would call again before he took off if there were any further instructions.

He never dreamed of the difference his unexpectedly early departure had made, nor of how "Dotty" had called to tell him to plead sickness and get out of making the trip at any cost so that the final act of the drama could be carried out. And naturally he knew nothing of the mechanic's joking lie about his not having gone but being in town with his girl.

The sun was well up when they passed ten thousand feet above the glistening ribbon of the Rio Grande. The motor was roaring smoothly and the air speed indicator showed that they were cutting through the ether at one hundred and twenty-five miles an hour.

Another two hours, Ned figured, and he would know their final destination, probably some other town in the northern part of the state, for the "ring" never used the same landing field twice.

THEY were about ten miles north of the river when Ned felt a sharp tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Seidaman excitedly pointing a little above and to the right of them.

Looking, Ned saw another plane a little over a mile away and about five hundred feet higher than they were. Even at that distance he recognized the markings of the Army Air Service. What, he wondered, was that plane doing along the border so early in the morning? Surely its presence had no connection with them. But the other plane was coming toward them, cutting down the distance at terrific speed; heading to intercept them.

Seidaman was tapping at Ned's shoulder again. The boy pulled back the throttle to hear him.

"They're after us," the observer screamed. "Somebody's given the game away. Turn back to Mexico, quick."

Ned thought swiftly. He knew immediately what he should do. White would want him to land safely, saving the dope as additional evidence, and if possible capture Seidaman, or at least keep track of him so that the men in the other plane could get him.

Instead of opening his motor and heading back toward Mexico, he stuck the plane's nose down toward the ground, nearly ten thousand feet below. Over his shoulder he could see the other plane, now only a quarter of a mile away.

Something hard poked him sharply in the back of the neck. In making his plans he had forgotten Seidaman and what he might do. The dope runner's voice rose above the scream of the wires and the throb of the retarded motor.

"—— —— you, you —— —— ——. Back to Mexico, quick!"

Ned had twisted his head around. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Seidaman's goggled face, the eyes demoniacal, blazing at him. The observer was leaning far forward out of his cockpit holding an army .45 caliber automatic against the boy's neck. Behind him Ned caught a glimpse of the machine gun which was mounted and prepared for action.

Ned knew if he didn't obey that the observer, crazed by fear and dope, forgetful of his own safety, would shoot him in a minute. So the boy opened his throttle slowly and started to bank slowly around toward the Mexican border.

"Faster!" Seidaman's voice rose even above the roar of the motor.

As he turned, Ned watched the other plane. It was only a few hundred yards away, diving across their path. He knew that it was faster than the one he was flying and that there would be no chance of escaping even if he wished to. He could see the pilot, leaning over the side, watching his every move. In the rear cockpit the army observer was swinging his machine guns toward the dope plane.

Ned saw that he was caught between the devil and the deep sea. If he didn't try to escape, Seidaman would shoot him. If he did keep on flying toward Mexico, the army plane could easily bring him down; not that he thought they would fire at him, for surely they knew who he was. But he wished that they would stay farther away. He knew that Seidaman would welcome the opportunity of opening on them with his machine gun.

Twisted half around as he flew Ned could see his own observer as well as keep an eye on the other plane. Seidaman still had the .45 trained on the back of his neck, but with the other hand he was swinging the machine gun toward the army plane.

In ten minutes they would be across the Rio Grande and out of reach of the army plane. But Ned felt certain that even if he did get Seidaman safely into Mexico, the dope runner would murder him as soon as they landed. There was insanity in the man's blazing eyes.

THE other plane was less than three hundred yards away—almost within good aerial machine gun range. The army observer was bringing his guns full on the dope plane and his bearing didn't suggest any compromise. The conviction suddenly overwhelmed Ned that a mistake had been made; that they didn't know he was flying the dope ship and were determined to force the contraband plane down before it could escape across the "line."

Ned tried to keep an eye on Seidaman, watch the army plane and maneuver at the same time. Still covering him with the revolver, the dope runner motioned toward the other ship. His meaning was plain. Despairing of escaping as long as the other plane was there, Seidaman wanted Ned to maneuver so that he could get in some good "bursts" and if possible bring the army plane down, and then make his escape. He had motioned for a climbing turn directly toward the other plane. Confident probably of his own ability as a machine gunner he believed that he would be able to shoot his opponents down before they could bring effective fire to bear on him.

As Capper started to obey, but with no intention of allowing his mad passenger to carry out his purpose, the army plane zoomed sharply upward, turned half on its back, and nose straight down, shot past the dope ship. Ned sensed the significance of the maneuver. The other pilot planned to come up beneath the dope plane, on its "blind" side, and shoot it down while protected from its fire. Ned pulled up in a steep right-hand climbing turn as the army ship shot past, and for the moment was safe. But the other's extra speed from its dive brought him just under and a little to one side of the dope runner. Seidaman was firing straight down, the throb of the machine gun drumming at Ned's ears above the roar of the motor. The boy, desperate at the thought of the army ship being hit, kicked on full rudder, throwing his plane into a whistling side skid and ruining Seidaman's aim. At the same instant Ned saw his lower right wing suddenly puncture in a dozen jagged places, mute evidence that the army gunner was getting dangerously close.

The army plane was above them again. As it turned to get in a shot with its front guns Ned stuck his nose down, and again kicking on full rudder, skidded under it. Seidaman, crouching low in his cockpit, had a perfect shot straight up at the army ship. Ned pushed his control stick forward as hard as he could and the nose of the plane dropped sickeningly toward the ground. Again he had saved the army plane from being hit by his mad observer, but he had turned the man into a raving maniac. He could see that the dope runner was convinced that he was deliberately spoiling his shots and at the same time making no effort to get across the line into Mexico. Then he let go of the machine gun and drew his revolver again. This time there was no mercy or reason in the dope runner's eyes. As he wheeled forward his lips were drawn back in a wolfish snarl; killer was written on every line of the drawn face and Ned knew that he was going to shoot.

Forgetting the menacing army ship, Ned ducked suddenly and pulled the control stick back into his stomach. As the nose of the plane shot up he kicked on left rudder, at the same time closing his throttle. There was the crash of a shot behind him and the dashboard in front of his face splintered where Seidaman's bullet had hit, missing him by inches. The sudden maneuver had spoiled his aim again. But Ned knew that the next time Seidaman would be more careful and, moreover, he couldn't keep the plane in a twisting, upside-down position all of the time. While it hung for a second on its back Ned snapped off both ignition switches and clinging to his control stick with his free hand unlatched his safety belt. Seidaman, he could see, was momentarily unbalanced and was hanging on to the edge of the cockpit desperately, but he hadn't dropped the revolver.

As the plane righted and whistled downward in a steep dive, Ned suddenly released the controls and, straightening up, turned and leaped for the rear cockpit where Seidaman was steadying himself for another shot. For a second the boy was in midair, but he caught Seidaman with one hand and the edge of the cockpit with the other.

The force of the impact knocked the gun from the dope runner's hand and he grappled with Ned. They were both half in, half out of the cockpit. Ned was trying for a blow that would knock Seidaman out, but the ship, uncontrolled, had stalled and was falling dizzily from side to side in a series of vertical dives.

Both of Seidaman's hands were about the boy's neck, strangling him. Using the wall of the cockpit as a brace he was pushing the young pilot back over the side. Ned felt himself slipping. The rush of the wind stream was tugging at him, helping Seidaman to force him loose, to send him hurtling to a horrible death.

With a final desperate effort he got a firm hold on the machine-gun mounting with one hand and with the other forced Seidaman's head back. For a moment they strained at each other, Ned's face purple, Seidaman's neck muscles knotted in agony. Suddenly the dope runner's hold weakened and he staggered back. Ned slid into the cockpit, weak and trembling.

Screaming and snarling like a wild animal, Seidaman rushed again. Ned's face dripped blood from the maniac's scratches but he was fighting coolly and calculatingly. His weight was telling against the smaller man, and his blows, though weak because of the narrow space, were driving the dope runner back over the side of the cockpit. A half hook to the jaw raised Seidaman from the floor and Ned's other fist, catching him square on the button, sent him sprawling half out of the plane. Ned jumped to catch the man but the ship gave a sudden lurch and Seidaman slipped limply over the side and plunged into space.

THE fight had taken only a minute but the ground was less than a thousand feet away when Ned jumped forward to regain the controls. Ten seconds more and the plane would strike. He fought the terrific wind stream inch by inch as he crawled forward. He got his hands over the edge of the front cockpit. A sudden pull forward and he brought up short, his right foot jammed in the machine-gun mounting. He couldn't free it and a feeling of helplessness nauseated him as he saw the ground rushing toward him hungrily.

Summoning his last ounce of strength he stretched forward with his right arm. His fingers just touched the control stick. Another inch he forced himself ahead, his muscles creaking at the strain. His fingers touched the stick again, grasped it and he pulled back hard as the ground seemed to merge with the nose of the plane. There was a plowing crash and everything went black.

When Ned came to some one was working on his right leg which stabbed with pain.

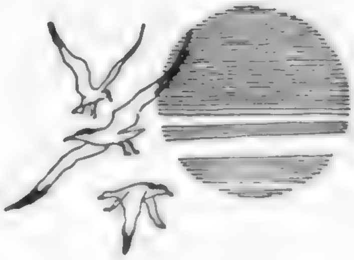
"Just the leg broken," a voice said. "He'll be all right and probably wake up in a few minutes."

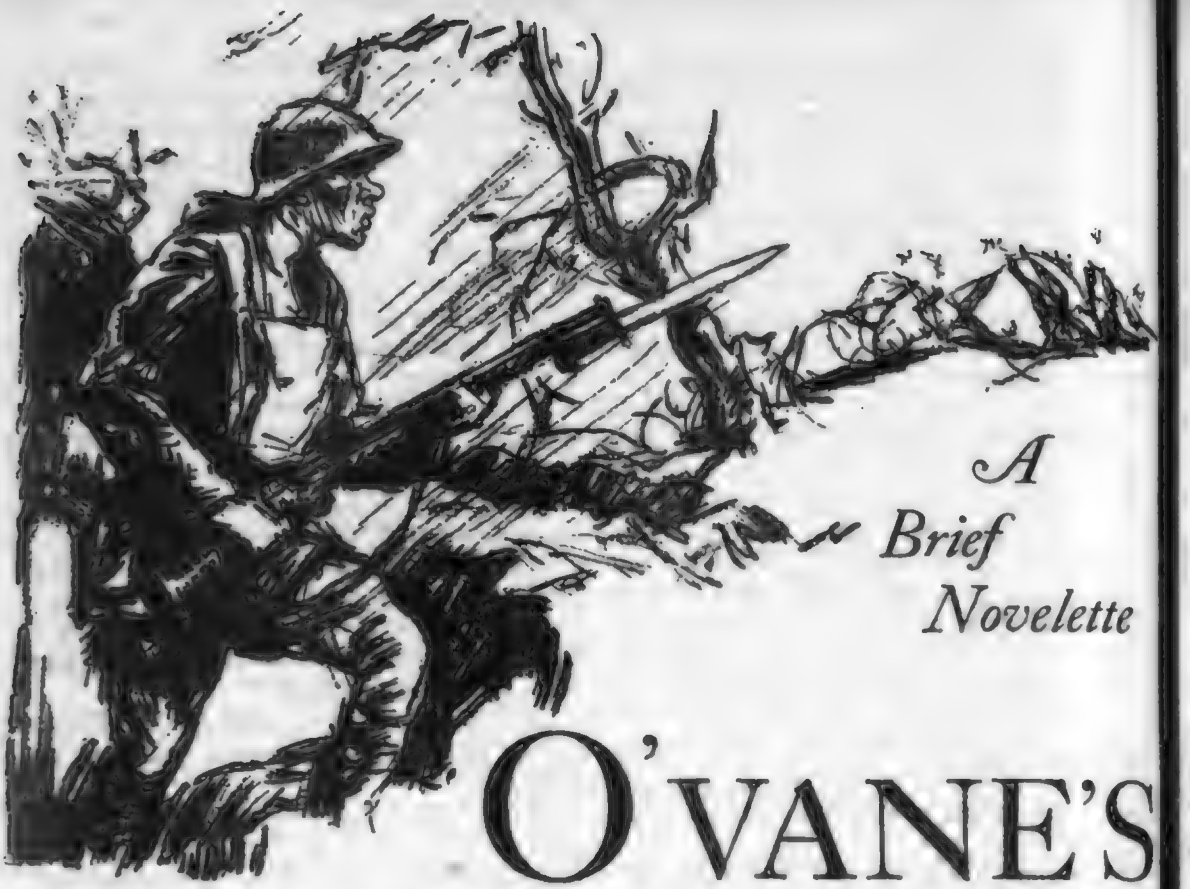
"Just did pull it out in time," some one else said. "God, what a fight! There I was right above them all the time. I recognized Capper when he jumped back on the dope runner, but couldn't do a thing to help."

Then Ned heard White's voice. "Some haul. There is over three hundred thousand dollars' worth of dope in the walls of the back cockpit, and Seidaman's sure through for good and all."

As Ned opened his eyes Major Brightman leaned over him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Snap into it and get well, old man," he said huskily. "Your regular army commission is waiting for you. Try and forget what I said when I washed you out. We want you back again, and for the good of the service, too."





A Brief Novelette

O'VANE'S

PRIVATE JOE O'VANE had put in most of the day preening himself with an infinite care that would have done credit to the vainest and most fastidious débutante. His preparations, in fact, for whatever event he had in mind, began the evening before when he immersed his one olive drab uniform in a tin cartridge-container of gasoline, abstracted for the purpose from the gas tank of a supply truck with the aid of a rubber tube he had taken from the regimental infirmary. The process of drying out his garb had kept him up until after midnight—and at reveille he was about again, dishabille of necessity, busy with a red hot pressing iron improvised out of an intrenching spade. The operation ruined the war implement but transformed the jaded and wrinkled O'Vane uniform into neatly creased and wholly presentable military habiliment.

"Bring on the perfume atomizer with some essence of heliotrope," roared the first cook, a civil engineer in civil life, whose culinary education, gleaned about campfires at home, had been seized upon as his most valuable asset to his country in these desperate hours of war.

"Can't you lend Private Clarise your lip stick?" added Professor Private Smith, whose teaching career at a Western University had been temporarily interrupted while he now fought the Germans at the keen, curved edge of a potato paring knife.

The whole of F Company's kitchen personnel joined in the acrid badinage, the while Private Joe O'Vane went ahead unconcernedly, quite unruffled, with the improvement of his personal appearance.

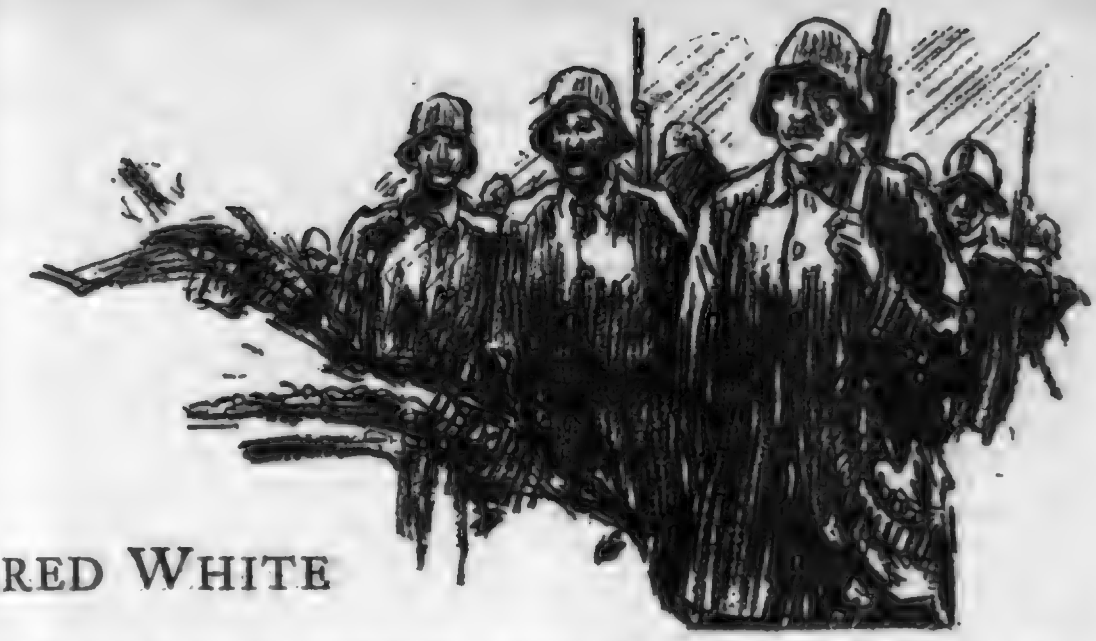
"*Cherchez la femme.* What's the answer!"

"I say, Joe, who's the mademoiselle—or is it a madame?"

"But maybe the handsome scoundrel's goin' to compete with the second louies and majors for one o' them 'Y' girls."

"My guess it's a countess, judgin' from the fuss he's makin' over his homely mug."

WHEN, after some moments of vigorous rubbing at stubborn jowls and indelible crows'-feet, Private Joe O'Vane finally became satisfied that he had made the most of himself, he adjusted his overseas cap at the proper rakish angle, picked up the swagger stick that he had tipped with a polished brass shell, and turned upon the satirical kitchen crew with an air of superior contempt.



ARED WHITE

Introduces a genuine new character creation in

Chevrons

"I presume," he said with biting emphasis, "that youse birds is so busy fightin' the war with fryin' pans an' corn willie, none o' youse heard this regiment has got itself a new colonel—who's arrivin' this very day to take over command."

There was a sudden thoughtful silence, jaws dropping and eyes widening. So it was. The new colonel was due today. Not an event to be made light over; for not even the coming of a new feudal lord in days of old could have been a more portentous event to his subjects than the coming of a new colonel to the officers and men of his regiment. Upon his whims and peculiarities of trait, upon his humors, the state of his digestion and his natural disposition must depend the matter of whether life was to gain or lose flavor. A regiment is a little vassal state in time of war. Its colonel the instant lord and master.

Private Professor Smith's irresponsible sense of humor broke the awed silence and brought them back to Private O'Vane's labored toilette.

"Well, Joe," Private Professor Smith demanded with a waggish leer, "you are hardly expecting it's a lady they're sending to command the regiment, are you?"

Private Joe looked from one to the other of the squad, measuring them with the scornful air of injury of one who has been shamelessly misjudged by those for whom he is performing great service.

"That" he retorted " 's jes' what I'm out fer findin' out—jes' what it is they's sendin' us to command this regiment!"

He swung on his heel impressively and marched out of F Company kitchen, turning in the direction of regimental headquarters company.

PRIVATE O'VANE made his way direct to the regimental headquarters company where he sought out the one old Army sergeant with the regiment. The sergeant was one of those seasoned and sophisticated files who could be depended upon to know the intimate history of every one of the handful of professional officers of the old Army who had been vested with the command and staff of this Titanic war-time army of millions of civilians in uniform.

The old Army file would have been certain to snub a younger man on such a mission. But O'Vane's maturity established an immediate bond of sympathy. Men past forty in the lower ranks were rare in this emergency fighting machine; and the old sergeant's tongue and sympathy responded at once to the welcome presence of some one who'd grown up even though he was a rank amateur in the military game.

Did he know the new colonel? The old sergeant sniffed disdainfully at such a question. Not only did he know him but he had served under his command when the colonel was a captain commanding a pre-war infantry company of some forty men—a mere matter of some two years ago.

"We never could quite understand the skipper" mused the old sergeant, dolefully. "When he came to G Company out at Fort Douglas he lined us up and gave us a long, high sounding lecture on what he expects of us. He said a lot about himself; what a fine fellow he was if treated right by his men and that we could count on him as a father. He got eloquent about his love for a good soldier—but it was the close of it that got us all. He said he wanted us to be inspired by the example of three great Americans. We'd find their pictures in the company room, he said, where he was having 'em tacked up by the first sergeant. When we saw those pictures we knew we was going to have to watch our step. Where there is, as the saying goes, too much ego in the cosmos, look out!"

"But what was they 'bout the pictures?" inquired O'Vane anxiously.

"Why, when we broke ranks and headed into the company room to see the three great Americans," replied the sergeant gloomily, "we find a large picture of George Washington on the right—a large picture of Abraham Lincoln on the left—and in the center, twice the size of the other pictures, a life-size painting of the captain. It was a sad, sad minute for G Company."

"Sure, an' I see nothin' fer sadness in all that" put in Private O'Vane, his face brightening unaccountably. A vain man was a thing of joy in his scheme of things.

The old sergeant paused in the lighting of a cigaret to fix upon him a look of patient pity.

"You'll learn," he said with the grim positiveness of a trained professional instructing a rank amateur, "that when an officer takes himself too serious he expects everybody under him to treat him the same way. Then there's bound to be trouble in the air—for it's just too much for poor weak human nature."

Private O'Vane laughed aloud in glee as he extended his hand in farewell.

"A most lovely sort, I'd say, Sargint," he exclaimed joyfully. "Youse make me love the colonel 'fore I see 'im. I know we's goin' to get on beautiful together."

II

PRIVATE O'VANE loitered abstractedly about the vicinity of regimental headquarters until the colonel, following his arrival to take command, appeared for the inevitable inspection promenade through the regimental area. Then he managed to maneuver about so as to bring himself directly in the colonel's course where, as the colonel approached, he froze at attention, his hand at an exaggerated salute, the muscles of his face set rigidly, his eyes staring straight at the colonel. No officer could pass such an apparition of military exactitude without pausing for admiration. Private Joe seemed in some strange way to epitomize the very spirit of the whole expeditionary force, the soul of battle itself, in a mood of obeisance to its supreme commander.

The colonel noted with satisfaction the spotless, neatly pressed uniform, the carefully cleaned buttons, the thoroughly bedubbined field shoes, the overweening semblance of soldiery perfection. He was for passing on, contenting himself with this portend of a strong enlisted personnel when Private Joe's voice arrested him.

"Sir, may Private O'Vane o' F Company speak wid the reg'mental commander, sir?"

The colonel stopped abruptly, looked the statue over with careful, unyielding eyes, and registered mild annoyance.

"Whose permission have you to speak to the colonel?" he asked in a quiet voice that nevertheless was not inviting.

Private Joe's face held its rigid, impersonal, martial expression as he avoided that query.

"Sir, Private O'Vane wants to ask o' the reg'mental commander to settle a bet, sir."

"What's the meaning of this—what kind of—"

The colonel was genuinely annoyed now and his voice became brusque and hard. Private Joe broke in on him adeptly before the storm could assume proportions.

"Sir, 'fore the Colonel arrives they was a lot o' birds says the Colonel wouldn't speak to no ordinary buck private in the ranks. When I sees the Colonel's fine he-man face, I bets that he will talk to the bucks that's goin' to fight fer him. I knows a man, sir, when I sees one, sir!"

Colonel Havilan's face reflected a panorama of conflicting emotions out of which at the end of a half minute's silence, there came uppermost a placated mood. It was a tribute to tempt any commander of troops in the field.

"You're quite right, my good man," he exclaimed in a full, resonant voice. "I never forget my interest in my men and I feel it my duty to encourage them with a word now and then. Er—what company do you belong to?"

"Sir, F Company, sir. An' the best company in the reg'ment, sir."

"Ah, that's the proper spirit—loyalty to your company!"

"Sir an' the best reg'ment in the hull Army, sir, now we got a real honest-to-God he-man fer commander. Youse is th' kind o' man, sir, what the men'll jes' natu'ally foller into hell fire if youse tells 'em to go, sir" averred Private O'Vane with such fervid sincerity that his thin little voice trembled.

"We will need brave soldiers" rejoined Colonel Havilan, flushing slightly and shifting from one foot to the other in a fleeting spell of self consciousness. "A brave soldier is—the Lord's noblest creation, I say!"

The colonel's humor had risen rapidly and he seemed in no special haste now to interrupt this unauthorized intrusion upon his time. Vanity finds little to feast upon in a service where fault-finding follows the smallest failure while excellence of performance is accepted laconically by higher authority as quite the natural thing. This private soldier was clearly a man of discernment.

"I note that you are not a non-commissioned officer" the colonel observed in some surprise. "I can hardly understand that, as you appear to be a mature and unusually intelligent soldier."

"Sir," Private O'Vane's face sunk into the depths of tragedy, "sir, that is the fault o' me company clerk, sir."

"What do you mean by that statement?"

"Sir, the cap'n orders the company clerk to rec'mend me fer sargint an' the company clerk he don't do it an' I gets left out, sir."

"You mean to say that your captain countenances disobedience of orders from his company clerk!"

"Oh, no, sir. It is this. Th' cap'n signs the letter an' the company clerk jus' don't take it to regimental headquarters. So the cap'n natu'ally thinks reg'ment don't want me promoted fer some reason. That's it, sir."

"Well, I certainly shall take this up with your captain and find out about it."

"Please, if the Colonel won't stir. Th' cap'n'd make it warm fer me sir—think I was complainin' to the Colonel, sir. It's honor enough, sir, jes' to be a private in yer regiment, sir."

"But a man of your maturity and intelligence is entitled to be a sergeant and I'm going to see to it that the recommendations are carried out!"

"Oh, sir, never in F Company, sir—they'd hold it in fer me goin' over the cap'n's head—an' that ain't jes' bein' the right kind o' soldier fer me, sir."

"And it isn't the right kind of captain that will let valuable non-commissioned officer material go to waste," Colonel Havilan replied with sudden emphasis.

He drew himself up to the majesty of his full stature, thrust his hand into his blouse over his left breast, and issued a terse order:

"I have said that you shall be a sergeant. What I have willed in my regiment, that must be. You are, therefore, and by my own express authority transferred V.O., C.O., to regimental headquarters company and promoted to the grade of sergeant. And now, Sergeant, you will report my wishes to the regimental adjutant at once. Good afternoon, Sergeant!"

THE captain of F Company, logically incensed that Private Joe had wormed his way into the colonel's confidence, took it upon himself immediately after retreat to warn the regimental commander of the real O'Vane. He, too, at the outset of command, had been taken in by this worldly wise gold-bricker with his somber red face and glinting little green eyes that seemed to hint at a man of real maturity and substance. In fact every officer F Company ever had in its year of World War service had been putty for a time in Joe's adept hands. His gift of flattery was the key that seemed to unlock any door.

It laid young officers at his feet. Five times in the year, at increasing intervals of time, he had attained the chevrons of sergeant. Had any one about him been vested with sufficient authority he must have been made at least a colonel just as he had been made a market inspector at home for no apparent reason.

If the Army had been one without a payday, Private Joe might have risen to command it in the end, could he but have had the ear of the President frequently enough. But a non-com who goes absent without leave at payday, or appears about camp on unsteady legs in boisterous mood singing that war is a rollicking lark, soon destroys the fruits even of genius. Lapses such as these are not flattering to the conceit of the commander whose faith is thus betrayed; nor are they good for military discipline. Nothing short of a new commander or a transfer to a new regiment could possibly restore Private O'Vane to temporary high favor. The new colonel must be warned. He must not be taken in by a gold-bricking malingerer.

"What is it you wish, Captain?" inquired Colonel Havilan, sitting back in his chair with an air of patient concern, as was his habit when one of his subordinates had permission to take up some official matter with him.

"I wished to speak with the Colonel about Private O'Vane, sir, of my company," the captain of F Company began with gallant assurance and directness.

"Sergeant O'Vane, of headquarters company, Captain," the colonel corrected him coolly, with that regard for nice precision of detail upon which he prided himself.

"I thought the Colonel would be interested in knowing, sir, that—"

"I feel Captain, that you have been derelict in wasting good non-commissioned officer material" the colonel broke in, his keen mind invariably reaching the end of a thought far ahead of the more sluggish mentality of his surbordinates. "I understand something of the circumstances—that you really tried to promote O'Vane. But in the service we judge by results. No doubt you have received the copy of orders transferring Sergeant O'Vane to headquarters company?"

The captain squirmed uneasily, set his jaw and proceeded with his mission. The colonel had all but confirmed his worst suspicion—that the irascible O'Vane had been casting aspersions upon his excellence as a company commander in order to gain his own arbitrary transfer and promotion.

"But, sir, the Colonel has been mis—"

"I have closed the subject of the O'Vane matter. Is there anything else, Captain, you wished to take up with me?"

"No sir, but if the Colonel will let me say a—"

"Good afternoon, sir!"

SERGEANT O'VANE, in response to a sharp summons from the adjutant, reported to the colonel a few moments later with dire misgivings. He had thought himself in a new era of opportunity—with the prospect of a day or two of leave at Paris before the regiment went to the front. Paris! The lure of the gay war capital was fast upon him. It fitted in with his idea of this war. When there was fighting to be had he pined for his share of it. But in the meantime a gay hour or two ought to relieve the deadly monotony of this senseless and endless drilling. Such a thought really had been at the bottom of his descent upon the new colonel.

Now the surface indications hinted at dire disaster. He had seen his erstwhile company commander sternly enter the colonel's private office. He had seen him come out, white-faced and laboring under some strange, strong emotion. Undoubtedly the captain had given the colonel a full and adverse report.

"I have been thinking" the colonel began at once in his purely official voice, "that I should have a dependable man whose sole duty it is to look after my personal effects and comfort. Shortly, when I become a general, I shall be provided with two aides and other attendants. While the tables of organization make no provision for me in my present grade, I feel quite justified in using one man out of my thirty-six hundred for this purpose. That was really my object in transferring you here. Do you feel you could fill the requirements of that assignment, Sergeant?"

"Sir—it's a great honor, sir," enthused Sergeant O'Vane, his pulse leaping with joy at learning thus that his old captain had not blasted his chances, after all. "I'll give me best to youse, sir."

"I will communicate the necessary instructions to my adjutant," said Colonel

Havilan with finality. "You may begin by arranging my quarters. My adjutant will give you your further instructions."

"Sir," Sergeant Joe ventured into the thought nearest his heart, seizing a sudden propitious opening, "if the Colonel 'll give me pass fer a day or two at Paris—'fore the reg'ment goes to the front—it'll help out a bit, sir."

Colonel Havilan looked up in surprised annoyance. A strange request with which to asume new and important duties.

"Sure an I have in me mind," Sergeant Joe spoke up quickly, "gettin' some trinkets what'll be useful, sech as a iron to press the colonel's clothes wid and some good brushes an' they can't be had at all, sir, here'bouts in this dirt hole, sir."

The colonel hovered between suspicion and acquiescence for an instant then wholeheartedly assented to the plan. After all there was reason in the sergeant's desire to have the proper equipment to care for the colonel's war wardrobe. He rang for the adjutant and gave terse instruction to that amazed officer for the issuance of a forty-eight-hour pass, with permission to visit the French metropolis.

III

THE ——th Infantry regiment, a week later, was in the throes of final preparation for movement to the front; and the regimental commander had gotten his own effects together, even rolling his own heavy bedding roll, when Sergeant O'Vane reported back from his leave, four days late. The sergeant's face was redder and more lined than ever, and added to the other tokens of hard service in the tempestuous battle of Paris, was a badly swollen and discolored right eye. As a matter of fact the black eye could not rightfully be charged to Parisian hospitality. It had come to him in the course of debate with a French *chef de gare* who had tried to prevent the sergeant from boarding the train without ticket or money. Sergeant O'Vane had boarded the train.

He reported back to the adjutant with a gloomy foreboding that added to his general misery. The regimental adjutant motioned him into the Colonel's office with a disdainful toss of the hand.

"Sir, Sergeant O'Vane reports back fer duty with the pressin' iron an' things for the Colonel" he announced, standing at rigid salute until the colonel released him from that frozen posture by a careless return of the courtesy.

The colonel spoke sharply and at once: "My confidence in you, Sergeant O'Vane, has been very badly abused. You, of course, understand the consequences."

"Sir!" exclaimed the sergeant feelingly, "if the consequence was death by a firin' squad, sir, I'd 'a' done it jes' the same."

"Just what am I to understand by that extraordinary statement, Sergeant?" Colonel Havilan demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"Sir, if the M.Ps hadn't 'a' held me up fer fightin' I'd been back here ahead o' time!"

"Fighting! Is that your idea of soldiery conduct? Is that the way you reward my confidence in you—by getting mixed up in an unseemly brawl—and then dare to come here and openly boast to me about it!"

"Sir," exclaimed the sergeant, his intense earnestness rising, "it was too much fer Joe O'Vane to stand fer—I'm sorry, sir, if the Colonel objects, but it would be hard fer me to stan' and hear sech words widout actin'."

"What are you trying to say Sergeant—what is this all about!"

"Sir, they was a bunch o' artillerymen says they has the best colonel in the Army, and he's goin' to command the hull Army 'fore this war 's over, says they. I tells 'em, sir, that this regiment claims that honor fer itself, sir, and when they boos me an' laughs, sir, and says disrespectful things—then I digs into the bunch of 'em, sir. No man can say things 'bout Joe O'Vane's colonel, sir, an' not answer fer it on the spot!"

The colonel sat through this amazing disclosure with very sober eyes, from which the hard glint faded as he looked upon Sergeant O'Vane's burning indignation. It seemed incredible—such furious loyalty—and yet O'Vane was a mature man of strong natural impulses. And perhaps, too, he was able to sense that certain star of destiny that might, indeed, carry the colonel to command of the entire field Army. He drummed the top of his desk reflectively for a time.

"I understand, Sergeant" he said finally. "But it is better not to fight. You may report to the adjutant and take charge of my effects. The regiment moves at dark tonight."

AS THE lowering sun was sinking at the end of the third day thereafter, and the regiment was shaking itself out of its long day of enforced rest under cover, in readiness for the last night's hike up into the seething ferment of action, Sergeant O'Vane was brought to his feet by a most harrowing spectacle. Down the narrow dirt road that threaded a tortuous way through scattered scrub oak some distance from the regimental bivouac, but only a few hundred yards from where Sergeant Joe had been lying out in a shady thicket, there appeared suddenly and unmistakably, a marching column of German soldiers, in full uniform.

He saw, with pounding pulse, the head of the enemy force swing in full and uninterrupted view where the road passed a rift in the shrubbery. They were marching on unconcernedly, without scouts or security measures, seemingly oblivious to the near presence of a large American combat force. The thought came to his startled brain that the Germans must have broken through and were flooding the American positions.

But, a moment later as he stood in speechless observation, the rear of the German column came into view and the phenomenon took on an entirely new light. In the wake of the Germans, who numbered perhaps fifty, there was an undersized American soldier with fixed bayonet. His easy swing and unconcerned air proclaimed that he was ready master of the situation. It might almost have been said, if his nonchalant air told anything, that the little hero was bored by the experience.

Sergeant O'Vane moved over at once for a close view. The ways of the fighting front were new to him, as they were to his regiment. Anon there might be nothing novel in the sight of German prisoners being taken in companies to the rear under the abject humility of a single American captor. But now it was a most compelling and inspiring sight, like the first burst of shrapnel or the first approaching wave of a German assault echelon.

"Pretty work, buddy," exclaimed Sergeant O'Vane approvingly, swinging into step with the heroic little figure. "Yer prisoners?"

"Yeh," responded the hero in a way indicating that he was not anxious to talk a lot about his feat.

"An' what outfit boasts o' bringin' you over here to herd the Kaiser's Army in?" the sergeant asked.

"Forty-secon' Division—Rainbows" replied the private.

"Jes' where'bouts they located 'round here?"

"Search me," said the little man disconsolately. "I lost 'em long ago when I went to the hospital."

The flash of an idea swept into Sergeant O'Vane's facile mind and he walked along silently meditative while the thought crystallized. He stopped suddenly and caught the diminutive hero by the arm.

"Say, buddy, half this outfit right here!" he demanded. The other merely looked at him. He was used to taking orders from nearly everybody until it had become a blind habit but he was not sure of the authority of this transient sergeant.

"Me own colonel wants to see youse right away and he says fer to stop this outfit an' wait right here!" Sergeant O'Vane added insistently.

The hero halted his captives with a drawled order in English and sat down on the ground with his bayoneted rifle between his knees, leaving the Germans standing listlessly in the road while Sergeant O'Vane, breaking into a lumbering run, started after the colonel. The sergeant arrived at regimental headquarters, something better than half a mile away, in a state bordering on collapse.

"Sir," he panted, his whole body wracked by the exertion as he stood unsteadily at salute before the colonel, "Sir, one o' the Colonel's men, sir, has captured a whole flock o' Heinies an' brung 'em in, sir!"

The colonel reached for his overseas cap and his indispensable riding crop, strapped on his spurs and started for his automobile. The situation was too complicated to be cleared up by mere conversation. He must learn first hand and by personal observation what the sergeant was talking about in such wild fashion.

THE little captor of all these enemy soldiers scrambled to his feet in sudden animation at the sight of the officer. Upon discovering that the officer was a full colonel, he set about the courtesies demanded of him, confusedly delivering first a hand salute, then a rifle salute, finally presenting arms and standing at that position as the regimental commander strode up.

"I commend you on your spirit, my man!" exclaimed the colonel, returning the salute and offering no comment upon the mistake in rifle courtesy. "You have shown the true American spirit. I remember that Napoleon himself was no larger than you. Where did you capture these prisoners—I did not realize we were quite so near the zone of action."

"Sir, I—I—this is—" The little man stammered painfully in the presence.

"You are a brave man," broke in the colonel enthusiastically, conserving the time that might otherwise have been wasted in a long statement by a subordinate. "A brave man is the Lord's noblest creation! The sergeant informs me that you have lost your division."

"Sir, I—I—this—"

"My regiment is only too proud to welcome you," announced the colonel. "Perhaps I haven't the authority to transfer you but I at least can attach you to one of my units and we can then take up the matter of your transfer."

"Sir, I—I—this a—" The private was in the throes of some strong emotion that had something the semblance of terror, but the colonel, with that rare facility for quick thinking and decisive action which marks the efficient commander, broke in with his final instructions.

"Sergeant O'Vane," he commanded, "you will escort this brave lad and his prisoners to F Company and attach him thereto, V.O., C.O. See to it that he rides in a truck when the regiment moves at dark as he must be fatigued. I will report these prisoners to brigade at once and have them taken off our hands before we advance."

Very soon thereafter, Colonel Havilan, in high fettle at this lucky stroke of fortune which gave his regiment credit for fifty German prisoners before he had gotten actually in action, received with keen satisfaction the crisp announcement over the field telephone that the brigade commander would call upon him immediately and in person. He was coming with timely felicitations, no doubt. The colonel chuckled at the stir this feat must have caused at headquarters.

THE brigade commander stomped in—a bristling little man of few words, which he usually barked through compressed lips; and he seemed to bristle more than ordinarily this evening. When he spoke now, his bark was as sharp as the edge of a trench knife.

"Havilan," the general snapped, "what sort of tomfoolery is this you've been up to!"

"Sir," replied the colonel, the blood fading from his face at this unexpected and astounding outbreak, "I—I don't believe I quite understand you, sir. One of my—my—men—brought in these German prisoners—"

"German prisoners, my foot!" snapped the general. "Service of Supply has been crying its head off and sending patrols all over creation for those men—thought they must have overpowered their guard and escaped into Germany—"

"But sir, I have them in safe charge and I have attached the man who captured them to one of my companies for rations, sir. He was—"

"That's just the whole trouble, Havilan," the general barked with increasing ferocity. "Those men were sent out to work on the roads—Prisoner of War Detachment Number Ten—men captured on the Marne three months ago and now supposed to be thoroughly dependable. Now you turn that detachment loose just as fast as you know how and let that sentinel march them on back to their camp! I'll expect your report that they're moving by the time I get back to headquarters—and don't make such a fool of yourself again!"

Some minutes later, Sergeant O'Vane listened at rigid attention to the acrid estimate of his general worth drawn by his regimental commander. When the colonel finished by characterizing him a worthless malingerer, the sergeant drew himself to the position of salute again.

"Sir—can Sargint O'Vane say—a word," he begged, searching his mind for something plausible to say.

"The only word I want to hear from you," said the colonel with biting severity, "is 'good-by.' I don't want to even hear of you again. Now get out!"

The colonel shouted in the next breath for his adjutant and issued a sharp order. "Captain, reduce this worthless malingerer O'Vane to the grade of private and transfer him by my orders back to F Company. Do it now. That's all!"

The adjutant, out in the headquarters room, fairly ripped the chevrons of sergeant from Private O'Vane's left arm, then turned, with a show of savage delight to throw them into the open stove. Private O'Vane interposed an objecting hand.

"Be careful, sir," he said respectfully but firmly. "Them ain't government issue but me own private property, sir, what I buys wid me own money back at Camp Travis, sir. I'll trouble the Cap'n to hand me property over to me!"

"A lot of good they'll ever do you," sneered the adjutant, reluctantly handing the chevrons to the newly made private.

"Youse can never tell 'bout that, sir," replied Private O'Vane quietly.

He wrapped the emblem of his faded glory in a clean sheet of writing-paper, tucked the package carefully into the bellows pocket of his blouse and ambled out into the deepening night, in the direction of F Company.

IV

IN A small thicket of second or third growth pine where the men had found shelter from enemy air observation through the day, Private O'Vane located the company headquarters, drew himself together as best he could and walked resolutely up to his company commander.

"Captain Helton, sir, Private O'Vane reports back to the best company in the Army fer combat duty," he announced, freezing into his most exact and impressive salute.

Captain Helton looked him over with a frigid and contemptuous air. He was far from having forgotten the rebuke he had received from the new colonel that day he had sought to warn the regimental commander. He also harbored the suspicion that Private Joe must have complained of F Company in general, and its captain in particular, in order to aid and abet his transfer to regimental headquarters company.

"So the C. O. finally got your number and kicked you out," he sneered. "I thought you'd be back one day. Roosters like you always come home to roost."

"Sir," replied Private Joe, concealing his inner misery by a supreme effort, "I asks to come back to F Company, sir, so's I can go over the top wid the best company in the Army. A fine show Private O'Vane'd made of himself skulkin' back at headquarters with me old Cap'n in the front wave, sir!"

"Cut out the bunk!" snapped the captain, moved to irritation by Private Joe's gallant words. "The regimental adjutant has told me something of the facts of your transfer. You nearly wrecked the colonel!"

"Sir, I was only tryin' to do fer the colonel a favor, sir. How was I to know them Dutchies was tame ones what—"

"Hold your tongue!" thundered the captain. "You've lost your talking part in this regiment. You've talked yourself out entirely. From now on you're going to soldier. No kitchen police, either. No soft snap. And now, you oily tongued reptile, get yourself a fighting outfit from the supply sergeant and then report to the second squad for duty as fast as you know how!"

Private O'Vane drew himself up to his full height and snapped into the position of grim salute.

"Sir, is that all the Cap'n wishes to say to Private O'Vane, sir?" he asked dryly.

"Yes—get away from here and stay away!"

"Sir"—Private O'Vane's eyes were level, his voice firm but respectful—"Sir, Private O'Vane thanks the Cap'n, sir, fer sendin' him to the sec'nd squad."

He pivoted with the precision of an automaton on the heel of his right foot and the ball of his left and strode to find the company supply sergeant.

THE gloom of self pity and blank despair brought on by the words of his two successive commanders gave way to a temporary ill humor of his own as he approached the second squad. It was not the idea of going into action that disturbed him. He always had thought of battle service with joyful anticipation. But this being thrown in, on equal terms, with a group of mere children was a bitter humiliation; for was he not old enough to be the father of lads of twenty and under who, for the most part, made up the fighting ranks of the volunteer regiments. And the corporal who commanded the second squad—whose orders he must take—was not yet out of his teens. His pride went down hard as he reported.

"Private O'Vane r'portin' to the sec'nd squad fer duty," he informed the slender, rather timid youngster who commanded the squad, a note of condescension in his voice.

The corporal looked up a bit nervously. Private O'Vane's prowess in wrapping his company commanders about his hand, and more lately his colonel, was widely known in the ranks. Far from being surprised when he showed up from time to time with sergeant's chevrons, they had half expected that he would appear in Sam Browne and shoulder bars one fine day. But here, now, was old Private O'Vane, stripped of his rank and reporting to the second squad. Failure quickly strips a man of all his glamour in youthful eyes. The corporal remembered his own responsibility as squad leader and rose manfully to the occasion of greeting his new inferior.

"You're in luck, O'Vane, to get into a real squad," the corporal exclaimed in a full, manly superior voice.

Private O'Vane stood regarding him for a moment in silent contempt.

"Me name's Private O'Vane, Corporal," he informed the corporal in a withering voice, the bitter reactions of the day's unhappy events now sweeping over him. "Private O'Vane, I says, an' not jes' O'Vane fer half-grow'd snips sech as youse. I have me sargint's chevrons in me pocket. I puts 'em there to get meself reduced so's I could have a bit o' real fightin' in the rifle ranks. Please to remember, Corp'ral, that youse is a nursemaid to this batch o' ungrown infants. With the likes o' youse makin' up squads they should change the name o' infant-ree to nurser—ee. Jes' remember that, Corp'ral, please."

He walked coolly to one side, seated himself with slow dignity, lighted a cigaret, and sat waiting for the order to fall in for the night's march, in all the appearance of unconcerned serenity of a man who hasn't a care in the world.

ON THE night of the third day thereafter, as F Company of the —th Infantry moved into its place on the regimental jump-off line in readiness for the first phase of St. Mihiel, the company commander made his final inspection, going through his ranks with a word of cheer here, a word of caution there, checking equipment and ammunition to make certain all was in readiness. Very shortly the artillery preparation fire would be turned loose in all its fury and at the first hint of dawn seven full divisions would plunge forward in attack.

Private O'Vane had spoken to no one in the two days of heavy marching that had brought the company into the area of the front lines. He had taken refuge in a stolid silence, the heroic silence of a martyr. It was not merely that the subtle music of his ready compliments had lost their power to soothe the savage breasts of his commanders. They had challenged his sincerity—treated him as if he were a mere dispenser of empty flattery, failing entirely to see the sincerity and loyal purpose that lay behind every word he said. Very well, he would keep his thoughts to himself and go through as a mere fighting man and nothing more. If plain soldiering was what they wanted of him, he would show them how well he could perform the rôle.

The captain of F Company paused for a moment at the second squad and looked O'Vane over with particular, if not admiring, interest.

"How goes it O'Vane—how you like the job of being a soldier?" Captain Helton inquired.

"Jes' right, sir," replied Private Joe, unable at the moment to resist the opportunity of this situation. "It's a great priv'lege, sir, to be at the jump-'ff wid the best company in the Army."

"Corporal," remarked the captain, ignoring O'Vane's remark and turning to the unseasoned stripling who commanded O'Vane's squad, "see to it that Private O'Vane doesn't lag and that he goes through with the squad and does his full part!"

Private O'Vane saw red. For the first time in his military service blind rage swept over him and it was with a supreme effort that he held himself in check. Questioning his sincerity, his fine intentions, was one thing. Casting doubt on his courage in the presence of these cradle-robbed children was another. It was perhaps fortunate that the captain moved off in the darkness to the third squad.

It was in that humor Private O'Vane heard the majestic fury of the massed and echeloned cannon of the preparation fire shatter the night into an erupting volcano. If other men felt the sickening quavers of high nervous tension under this bombardment, if an occasional man broke and ran in hysterical terror or slipped away quietly toward the stragglers' line, Private O'Vane found within himself a quickening of the pulse, a stirring impulse to rush forward with his gun and bayonet and become a part of this raging tempest of battle. It was all a sort of Titanic outward expression of his own inner mood. He lay tense, impatient through the long bombardment, straining at the leash as an athlete waits for the crack of the starter's pistol.

When the order for the infantry to advance did come, he leaped forward firing rapidly into the void before him and a moment later began urging the men of his squad on to a faster pace. It enraged him the way those men seemed to hold back, the corporal having been reduced to a mere gaping mannikin by the wracking stress of this baptsim of fire; all of them moving ahead on legs that seemed unequal to the full task of carrying them, eyes stark, mouths agape, faces livid. Grim experience alone must wean these children of their terror and teach them to frolic boldly through seething infernos hand in hand with the myriad skulking specters of sudden death.

BY NATURAL process, since he was possessed of no qualms of sickly fear, Private O'Vane became their leader. As men fell and the lines eddied back and forth in the red business of overcoming machine-gun resistance, Private O'Vane became the leader of the remnant of two squads, carrying the section along by a fearless domination that the fury of battle seemed to awaken in his breast, perhaps out of dormant generations since hardy forebears went into action thus. When there was a stubborn machine-gun nest ahead, he would move swiftly to his flank and take it with a furious assault of hand grenades, rifle fire and final bayonet thrusts. The records of every combat division team with the heroic exploits of unsuspected heroes who did unbelievable things, the while sneering at death that whirled about them in a hundred forms and never laid finger upon them. Few such records could surpass the fiery conduct of Private O'Vane in this morning of action.

Early in the afternoon, when the line was halted while the regiment took stock of its situation and drew its tangled ends together in preparation for the final advance to the end of the day's objective, Private O'Vane was singled out by his platoon commander to lead a detachment of four men out as a scout patrol to gain information of the enemy. The Germans had shown no willingness to stand and fight today, their tactics that of delaying the American advance with galling machine-gun and sniping fire, with occasional local counter attacks by small forces. Their disposition and exact strength in front of F Company was now undetermined and it was Private O'Vane's mission to gain contact and report the situation.

He went forward in fine fettle, warmed by this show of recognition of his mature judgment; although the mission lost much of its zest in the positive orders that he was out for information and must not engage the enemy except in dire emergency or in order to effect the escape of his patrol. After having made his way the greater part of a kilometer to the front without encountering enemy patrols or positions he began to suspect that the Germans must have withdrawn altogether from in front of F Company when, emerging incautiously onto a small rise he found himself in the sudden precarious position of looking hard into the faces of a strong enemy detachment less than fifty meters distant. He calculated instantly that this must be a delaying force as they were arranged under good cover, immediately on the flank of two camouflaged machine-guns that commanded a wide field of fire to the front.

Discovery was simultaneous, and several Germans rose to fire. There was no time for him to take cover before they could send in their copper jacketed messengers of hate.

With an intrepid impulse that must have been born of inherent battle instinct Private O'Vane raised his hand in warning, then beckoned violently for the Germans to come forward, at the same time using his left hand to signal his own unseen patrol to take cover. The Germans merely returned the invitation with equal energy and insistence; whereupon Private O'Vane's startled detachment saw him slant his rifle back over his shoulder and march unconcernedly down to the German position.

"Throw down your rifle and come as a prisoner!" sharply commanded a German officer, in good English.

"Not so fast me friend," retorted Private O'Vane, walking on up to the German lieutenant collectedly. "Youse is my prisoners—put down yer guns an' be quick!"

The German officer gasped his surprise at this unheard of presumption and again ordered the American's instant surrender.

"Youse makes a fool o' yerself," cried Private O'Vane without hesitation. "Do youse all want to be blowed into smithereens? Come wid me, I says, an' move fast. What youse suppose I comes over here fer 'cept to save yer lives fer youse. Sure an' me own father's a full-blooded German an' wasn't I born meself right over in—in—Hamburger. And when they's goin' to blow youse to pieces, thinks I mebbe I'll be killin' me own uncle an' it's a mercy to take youse prisoner. So over I comes—colonel though I am—to save youse. Fall in quick, now. Our artillery's got yer range an' me brave lads 'll blow youse all to bits in a minute—an' me wid youse. It was the chance I took, thinkin' youse had some sense left."

PRIVATE O'VANE'S strange words were not to be sneered off lightly. Not only did his fervent sincerity carry conviction but there was the supporting evidence of the man's straightforward approach to their ranks when he might have bolted to cover. He wore the uniform of a private soldier but that was a practise of American commanders when in action; and this man was quite old enough to be just what he said. The German lieutenant's orders were merely to delay the enemy as long as possible. Now that his concealed position was discovered to the American artillery his mission was ruined and a swift concentration of shrapnel would blot him and his men out in a twinkling. The lieutenant hesitated for some moments as he carefully estimated the desperate situation. Then he did the only sensible thing to do under the circumstances. He ordered his men to lay down their guns, called in the machine-gun crews from the right flank, and surrendered to the generous German-American colonel.

Private O'Vane, forming them eight abreast for compactness, and herding them back exultantly, was seized with a sudden joyous plan. It was little short of an inspiration. He would march these prisoners—sixty of them—right back to the regimental command post and deliver them to the colonel himself. No prisoner-of-war work detachment this—but real wild Germans, captured and disarmed in their own lair; not the largest single detachment ever taken by a single American from an enemy that sometimes surrendered in companies, but quite large enough to make full amends for that humiliating blunder of a few days ago when he had misled the colonel into capturing a work party of previously captured Germans behind the lines. He chuckled aloud at the happy prospect of appearing thus, with full reparation, before his regimental commander.

His cup of happiness filled to overflow when the captain of F Company came out to greet him as he entered the lines with his prisoners. Private O'Vane's bag, indeed, outnumbered all other prisoners so far taken by the regiment which had picked Germans up during the morning by twos and threes as enemy machine gunners, serving their hot weapons until the last minute, would rush forth and deliver themselves with cries of "Kamerad" in order to escape death. Captain Helton actually commended him for his feat, after listening to the brief O'Vane account of the exploit. And in the next breath he dashed Private O'Vane's cup of happiness to the ground.

"You'll find the collecting point for prisoners at the first road crossing a half a kilometer from here," the captain instructed him. "Take a squad with you and turn your prisoners in at once!"

"But, sir," Private O'Vane interposed in protest, "the Cap'n'll understand me wish to hike these Heinies to the colonel himself. It'll undo—"

The captain's face hardened. He called sharply to a sergeant a peremptory order to take over Private O'Vane's prisoners and deliver them at once to the collecting point.

"If you ever dare," the captain charged O'Vane hotly, "go near the colonel again—I'd be tried for it. Back to your squad, O'Vane, and never let me hear you mention 'regimental commander' to me again. That's all for you!"

V

WHEN, in the course of some unspeakable red weeks the broken remnants of the—th Infantry emerged from the crimson throes of the reeking Argonne and settled into a rear area to rest body and soul and fill its jagged gaps with replacements from St. Aignan, there came to the glorious regiment a great day. Such had been the distinction of its collective service that its colors were to be decorated by the French. The President of the United States would be represented by a civilian functionary from Paris, the French were sending one of their greatest generals to officiate in the decoration, and there was the possibility that the King of Belgium, in the course of a motor visit to American General Headquarters at Chaumont, might pause for a few moments in the regimental area to be present for this immortal ceremony.

The civilian representative of the President of the United States was the first to arrive on that glorious morning, coming in unannounced by motor-car from Paris. He had little more than made inquiry of an alert sentry as to where regimental headquarters might be located, than a middle-aged person in spic and span uniform that reeked, however, of gasoline, stepped up to him and froze into an attitude of exaggerated salute that half startled the visitor.

"Sir," the soldier announced in a firm impersonal voice, "Private O'Vane o' F Company, r'ports to yer 'xcellency fer duty as orderly, sir."

The visitor, palpably unaccustomed to military ways despite a high military title which he must have acquired by some process of voluntary adoption before the war, smiled uncomfortably. "Why, I hardly expected all this fuss to be made over me," he said pleasantly. "It's a great honor, I'm sure— Just what are you to do with me?"

"Sir, it's me business as orderly to look out fer yer 'xcellency's comfort, sir," Private O'Vane informed him. "And it's a great honor, sir—the greatest o' me whole life—to r'port to a great gentleman sech as yerself, sir."

Private O'Vane, saluting again, attempted to follow the distinguished visitor at the stipulated three paces but the great man insisted, with the easy democracy of America, that Private O'Vane walk beside him, the while he plied him with questions.

Thus it was, strolling side by side in earnest conversation, that they appeared at regimental headquarters where the colonel hurrying forth to meet the distinguished visitor, was shocked into an abrupt halt by the spectacle. He had been trying to forget that such a person as Private O'Vane existed. Mastering himself quickly he came forward to greet the President's representative and rescue him from the uncouth clutches of the irrepressible O'Vane. The colonel, whose natural reaction was ill humor at the very sight of O'Vane, completely ignored the private's exaggerated salute, leaving him frozen in that rigid position where he might have remained until he disintegrated so far as the colonel was concerned. But the distinguished visitor showed no inclination to be rushed away without his newly acquired friend the orderly.

"A mighty fine orderly you've given to me," commented the distinguished visitor turning toward O'Vane. "It was quite unnecessary, Colonel, but I wish to thank you for the courtesy and say that I'm certain you could not have picked out a more agreeable and efficient orderly."

Colonel Havilan, having no alternative, snapped his hand to the visor of his dress cap to release O'Vane from his absurd posture of salute. He bit his lips and controlled the tempest within him by an effort. Private O'Vane was the last man in the regiment—in the whole world—that he would have selected for such a duty. He shrewdly guessed that O'Vane had taken the task upon himself. But he knew he was helpless for the present to say as much, or to send O'Vane to his quarters. What might the visitor think of the state of discipline in this glorious regiment if he learned that one of the enlisted men had taken him in charge without authority. The friendly attitude of the visitor toward O'Vane, too, further complicated the problem of getting rid of the nefarious interloper.

FREE and easy American democracy overstepped itself a moment later, however, and firm intervention became imperative. When the President's representative, escorted to the officers' mess for breakfast, saw O'Vane halt abruptly at the entrance, he turned to invite him inside little knowing that he trespassed upon the utterly impossible. The colonel gasped, then turned livid. Battalion commanders and regimental staff officers who had been invited to breakfast for the occasion, squirmed uneasily. Not even the President's own representative could presume to admit an enlisted soldier to the sacred precincts of an officers' mess—unless to wait on table. Officers and men might fight together, might even die together in the same shellhole without social embarrassment, but the suggestion was inexpressibly horrible that they might eat together.

Colonel Havilan, on the verge of rescuing himself and his officers from this embarrassing situation by a frank explanation, was relieved of that unhappy necessity by O'Vane himself. He was not a man to overstep his allotted place, particularly since the thought of sitting at the officers' mess held forth no appeal.

"Sir, if yer 'xcellency will excuse me, sir, I've had me breakfast an' will have a bit o' fresh air, sir, waitin' fer youse outside," he pleaded.

The glorious record of the —th Infantry was being reviewed in all its brilliant details over the final coffee and cigarettes, when an orderly bustled inside, hat in hand, and whispered to the adjutant. The regimental adjutant arose precipitately and hurried to repeat the information to the colonel. The colonel stopped in the middle of a sentence, leaped to his feet and started for the door with a hastily uttered excuse.

"The French Army Commander has arrived—he's ahead of time—I must meet him at once—you know how touchy those French are. I'll meet you gent—" The unceremonious slamming of the door behind the hurrying colonel drowned out the final words of explanation.

THE instant the door was closed Colonel Havilan stopped stock still and stood as if spellbound gaping at the most astounding spectacle that had ever fallen before his eyes. The great French General had dismounted from his car with the several members of his staff trooping behind him. Directly in front of the party, as rigid at attention as a fine pointer held by a covey of quail, stood Private O'Vane. The fact that he held the salute after the general had returned it in full measure, told that Private O'Vane had every intention of an audience with the general.

"Sir," he exclaimed in the high-tension voice that went with the salute, "Private O'Vane o' F Company, sir, begs a word wid the General o' the French Army."

The General's limited English vocabulary being unequal to the situation, he turned to his commissioned interpreter who, with many gestures, transmitted Private O'Vane's request; whereupon the great general immediately smiled his assent.

"Sir," Private O'Vane proceeded, "me father was a full-blooded Frenchman. He was born in—in Bologny—and he says to me, sir, if it's ever me fortune to see youse, sir, to feast me eyes on the greatest French soldier not even exceptin' Gen'ral Napoleon, sir. It's a great honor you've give me sir, an' Private O'Vane thanks youse sir."

The interpreter occupied considerable time in reducing this fine speech to the French language for the information and delectation of the French General. This process put Private O'Vane ill at ease. With that not uncommon passion of many humble folks for a word or a touch of the hand with the great and near great, Private O'Vane had thought merely to have a word with the great French General. What an achievement to talk of among his awed intimates back in New York after the war; for how could he return without claiming terms of some intimacy with the great war figures under whom he had served. He, who had actually shaken hands with a great President once, and had visited on easy terms with the Governor of New York, and had all but hobnobbed with police inspectors and the like! Having accomplished his mission of speaking with the famous French General, Private O'Vane snapped into the salute of departure.

But the general did not release him by return of the salute. As the interpreter completed the translation the great general's dark eyes sparkled and his face broke into a wreath of smiles. He stepped forward, struck an equally rigid position of salute after the French manner of doing such things, and held it while he replied in very broken English.

"Ah—ze brave Franco-Americain! Permeet me—!"

With an indescribably precise series of quick movements, as practised as if he had been doing a sort of manual by count, he unfastened from among the heavy network of glittering decorations on his own breast, one of several croix de guerre with palm clusters, pinned it on Private O'Vane's right breast, put a hand on each of O'Vane's arms, and gave the startled private a hearty kiss on each cheek. Then he stepped back two paces, saluted O'Vane ceremoniously again, turned on his heel and walked off followed by his staff.

PRIVATE O'VANE was left standing in a daze from which he had not recovered when he started, first in one direction, then in another, back to the regimental mess. The sight of Colonel Havilan standing in speechless impotence idly staring at the approaching general, cleared O'Vane's mind and he proceeded quickly to the mess by a very indirect route, reporting at once to the President's representative who had emerged by this time from the officers' mess.

In the course of the next half hour, Colonel Havilan found an opportunity to give detailed and definite instructions to his adjutant. There was no such thing as dealing with O'Vane until the day's events were ended and the President's representative had taken a most welcome departure back to Paris. But the captain of F Company would be informed of what had happened. He would turn his company over to his first lieutenant, and he personally would hold himself in close proximity to Private O'Vane throughout the remainder of the day. The King of Belgium was to visit the regiment—the rarest jewel of good fortune—an event that would become part of the regiment's most cherished and enduring traditions. The French general had informed this portentous fact of the king's impending arrival. And the captain of F Company would be held personally responsible to the colonel of the regiment if Private O'Vane, continuing his mad conduct of the forenoon, dared to mar the brilliant occasion by so much as approaching within speaking distance of the king.

As he saw his company commander loom into the immediate background, Private O'Vane moved instinctively closer to the President's representative. He also sought refuge in greater verbosity in replying to the distinguished gentleman's numerous questions; for notwithstanding the colonel's adroit maneuver in assigning a captain aide to the visitor, the President's representative, whatever his faults, did not lack constancy. His manner displayed a frank preference for his orderly, O'Vane, over the stiffly formal staff captain. Only by managing to keep fully and intimately occupied with his duties as orderly could Private O'Vane hope to find refuge from the storm that he now, all too late, saw brewing in his wake.

WHEN the King of the Belgians arrived in his large crested motor car, he was received as a king should be received on an informal visit to troops in the field. Nothing had been left to chance. Not only the entire of the available regimental staff, but selected line officers, were at the job of fortifying the moment of the king's arrival.

A chain of motor cycle patrols were put out as far as two villages away to watch for the royal party while the field music brushed up on its ruffles and the band rehearsed the Belgian national air. And when the stirring word came that his majesty had whirred through a village ten kilometers distant, the troops were drawn up while the regimental headquarters waited breathlessly for the imperial arrival.

Perhaps the one minor detail that was overlooked could not possibly have been foreseen. Moreover, what more natural to suppose than that one of his Majesty's own uniformed attendants would perform the function of opening the king's limousine door for him at the proper instant. For that matter it was hardly decorous for the receiving party to rush forward to greet a king in that breathless moment when his car drew up. There must be a respectful dignity, an unhurried formality in the serious business of greeting a full-fledged monarch.

But the King of the Belgians did not turn out to be a very formal king on this occasion. Possibly he wanted to make every one of his crowded minutes count for something. Without waiting until an alert attendant had leaped from the driver's seat and passed about the car to open the door, his Majesty laid hold of the inner handle and turned it with his own hand. It jammed, obstinately refusing to yield to several sharp kingly jerks. And the while the formal array of officers and dignitaries of the receiving party stood stiffly at attention, their mental processes awed into inactivity by the presence of royalty, there leaped into the breach the intrepid form of Private Joe O'Vane.

With incredible swiftness he was at the door of the great limousine; in a flash he had turned the outer handle of the unyielding door and released the imprisoned monarch; in a third instant he was standing in that frozen salute of his while his Majesty descended from the car.

Colonel Havilan, following the lead of the French General who was personally acquainted with the king and more or less accustomed to greeting royalty, stepped forward, swallowing his heart with difficulty at the appalling catastrophe that threatened him and his regiment with unspeakable disgrace.

But his intervention, the formality of official greeting, was left high in the air by the king himself, who, instead of treating this interloper from the ranks with merited contempt, returned Private O'Vane's salute with fine precision and turned to him in friendly interest.

"Thank you for helping me," said the king pleasantly, in very good English. "May I inquire your organization?"

Private O'Vane's tension was nearly at the breaking point, his eyes starting uncomfortably, his face distorted as if by an impending stroke of apoplexy. Speech with a king surpassed his most vivid imagination and he was not entirely equal to it.

"Sir—Private O'Vane—Yer Reverince—F Company o' the ——th Infantry, sir," he replied brokenly.

"Ah, you are a part, then, of this splendid regiment," exclaimed the king. "I congratulate you on the honor."

"Sir—it's a great honor, sir—to speak wid the greatest king in—the world, sir," Private O'Vane managed to splutter fervently. "Me father, sir, was a full blooded Belgum, sir, an' he says every Belgum would die fer his king sir—it's the grandest honor o' me life, sir."

"Ah, a Belgian-American!" the king replied, his face lighting up with approval, "again I congratulate you."

He turned to a military aide who now stood beside him and said a few words. The aide brought from a pouch a small bright object, and in the next moment, in the presence of the regimental commander, his staff, the French general and the representative of the President of the United States, His Majesty, the King of the Belgians pinned on the coat of Private O'Vane the coveted Order of Leopold. The king business, obviously, was not exactly the austere and arrogant formality it used to be—and the representative of the President of the United States reflected that the thing of being a popular and successful king did not seem to differ very much, if at all, from the business of being a successful politician back at home.

VI

IN THE silent hour when darkness had dropped its kindly curtain upon a glorious and immortal day, and the last distinguished guest, including the civilian representative of the President of the United States, had taken departure, Colonel Havilan sat sprawled in his chair at regimental headquarters, alone. Not even the wracking trial of his first battle had played such havoc with his nerves as the strain of this day with its prodigious responsibilities. At the sound of footsteps in the outer room he forced his tired body into an upright position and brought his worn, sagging features into lines of proper dignity and severity.

The captain of F Company entered silently, saluted, and stood waiting through a foreboding silence until the colonel spoke. The reason for the summons was quite clear to the captain of F Company. He had failed in his mission of keeping Private O'Vane from making a spectacle of the regiment before the King of the Belgians.

"I will, of course, Captain, give you an opportunity to be heard," the colonel said with a judicial deliberation that was far more terrifying than the mere raving of a commanding officer who has exploded in ill temper. Of all the colonel's varying moods this one of seeming judicial calm was the most ominous.

"Sir, I did my best," said Captain Helton. "I stood close to Private O'Vane and kept my eyes upon him—but he moved out so unexpectedly, sir, that I had no opportunity to stop him without a scene."

"That," replied the colonel, his words coming one by one in solemn succession, "might be a satisfactory explanation if there were but one incident. However, there are many. You have let this man of your command run hog wild, so to speak, which would not be the case if you were capable of instilling the proper discipline into your men."

"But sir," expostulated the captain. "I have suppressed this fellow O'Vane a dozen times—kept him out of your way and notice—kept him from annoying you—kept you from being bothered by the mere mention of his name, sir. I was totally unprepared for what happened today, sir."

"You generalize, Captain, you generalize. Please be more specific in your statements."

"Sir, I intercepted him personally with that batch of prisoners who—"

The colonel flushed. "You will please never mention that most humiliating incident in my presence again, Captain," he said irritatedly.

"Sir, not the prisoners you mean—other prisoners, sixty of them that O'Vane captured during the St. Mihiel—"

"You mean O'Vane took some real German prisoners?"

"Yessir—sixty of them that first morning we went over, sir, and I caught him marching them back to your P. C. sir. He said he wanted to make good and I took the prisoners away from him."

"Private O'Vane had sixty prisoners!" the colonel demanded, fixing upon the captain of F Company a look of sharp incredulity.

"Yessir—and he sold himself later to his platoon commander, sir. Lieutenant Smith wrote up and brought to me a recommendation that O'Vane be given the Distinguished Service Cross. I promptly put a stop to it sir."

"The Distinguished Service Cross for doing what!" the colonel snapped.

"Sir I have Lieutenant Smith's letter of recommendation in my pocket. I not only refused to approve it sir, but I very properly refused to bother the Colonel by forwarding it on. If the Colonel wishes to read it, sir—"

Colonel Havilan took the badly wrinkled document with an abrupt movement of his hand. It recounted the taking of five separate and distinct machine gun nests, one pill-box, the rallying of broken rifle sections on four distinct occasions—twice at St. Mihiel and twice in the Meuse-Argonne—and the capture, single handed, of a total of seventy-two prisoners. The citation was brief and laconic with a word or two misspelled, a split infinitive and an error in tense and number. As a military document it left nothing to the trained imagination. Yet the colonel must have spent ten minutes reading the single page of manuscript and when he finished he arose impetuously, his mood of judicial calmness gone, to stride back and forth across the room in agitation.

"Have Private O'Vane report to me here instantly!" he ordered.

When he came into the room and stood before the colonel's desk, Private O'Vane's frozen salute had lost nothing of its rigidity; but it was clear that he was laboring under great stress and had brought all his moral forces into play to face this ordeal manfully. The colonel had seated himself stiffly at his desk and his manner again was calm and collected, although with a suggestion of strong passion held loosely in check just under the surface of his impulsive nature.

"Private O'Vane," he said stiffly, "I presume that you realize you have made an unmitigated nuisance of yourself today?"

"Sir, can Private O'Vane speak, sir, I was only tryin' to be—" began O'Vane his voice unsteady in spite of himself.

"No sir—not a word out of you O'Vane," broke in the colonel. "I will do the talking and you will keep your mouth closed—difficult as that ordeal may be for you—except when you are spoken to. I am informed that you brought in another party of some sixty Germans. Is that true?"

"But sir," protested O'Vane, "sure I am they was real wild Germans and not some more o' them boche pets. I means no harm sir—I—"

"You are also said to have done some other things—the exact nature of which I will read to you."

Colonel Havilan arose, walked from behind his desk and, standing before Private O'Vane, read the lieutenant's letter of recommendation.

"SIR, I thinks that was all part o' me job. I didn't ask o' the lieut'nant to write no sech letter, sir."

"Private O'Vane," exclaimed the colonel, his emotions breaking loose suddenly, "I will forward that recommendation approved! I want to commend you—I want to congratulate you—sir—I want to inform you that you are promoted here and now back to the grade of sergeant V. O., C. O. I salute you!"

Private O'Vane heard the clash of spurs as the colonel's heels clicked together and he saw through bulging blinking eyes his regimental commander standing before him at the position of salute.

"You are a brave soldier, Sergeant O'Vane," Colonel Havilan added in a voice that broke perceptibly. "A brave soldier is the Lord's noblest creation. Good evening, sir!"

Groping his way out of the colonel's office, Sergeant O'Vane paused before the regimental sergeant major's desk and asked the sergeant major for two ordinary pins. He took these across the room and handed them to the regimental adjutant. Then he took from his pocket and unwrapped his carefully preserved chevrons, handed them to the staff officer and extended his left arm.

"Sir," he requested respectfully, "will the Adjutant please to pin back on me arm the chevrons youse tore off the Sargint's sleeve last month, sir."

Devil-Tails

A Rowdy and Rollicking Story of the West

By ANTHONY M. RUD

THERE was plenty of time. Toi-Yabe Tolman hazed the two pack burros carrying his prospecting outfit into a blind, narrow canyon between the red-sifting walls of the disintegrating mountain, and then dropped behind a jagged upthrust of granite powdered with the vermilion dust of the Red Chalk Range. Fingers sought the wooden butts of his thonged down .44's.

Behind the broken molar of granite, at the foot of the Red Chalk Range, he waited. Something was decidedly out of kilter with the man who stumbled in his direction. Toi-Yabe had good and sufficient reasons new and old which made him shy at company, even though he held no idea that he might be recognized. Still, there was something about that weaving, strangely swaying figure which caught his attention. This seemingly drunken stranger clutched at boulders and rock pinnacles as he came along, occasionally fell—and lay for seconds inert!

Toi-Yabe heard him muttering in a tone of subdued anguish. The sound carried faintly. The prospector shook his head, puzzled; then he sheathed one six-gun, still holding the other ready, and cautiously straightened. Nothing happened. He saw the man—a stranger not even carrying a canteen—stumbling, groping a way in the squaw weed and ocatilla. Then half shocked realization came to Toi-Yabe. *The man was blind!*

He stared. The oncoming man had slumped again. This time he did not rise. Groans came faint but indistinct. The stranger was dying for want of water! So said Toi-Yabe to himself as he ducked back for a half-gallon canteen, and then hastened forward. Canteen in one hand, and long-barrelled single action ready to thumb-fan in the other, he strode fast—and gained the side of a stranger he knew at first glance to be a cattleman.

A cowman! Whence he had come, he alone knew. There was no range within one hundred miles, as far as Toi-Yabe was aware. Yet here was a fellow, Stetsoned, partly bald (the hat had rolled away on its stiff brim), a faded silk shirt, and cord trousers. One gun—a .38 Smith & Wesson long-barrelled range special. It showed brown smoothness in the blue; it had been used for years. With the contempt of a man of ore and placers Toi-Yabe locked it back in its leather, not troubling even to break the weapon and eject the cartridges. A kid's toy. He did not even surmise the deadly execution some of the punchers with whom this stranger consorted could do with the despised popgun.

The middle-aged newcomer groaned throatily again. He had fallen with his face in the crook of one elbow. Toi-Yabe noted, as he bent to roll the stranger to his back, that the shoulders were heaving irregularly, as with sobs or choking. Also, the back of his neck looked puffy and oddly misshapen!

ONE glance at the face upturned to his, and Toi-Yabe, hardened desert dweller that he was, started back with an involuntary gasp of astonishment and horror. *Smallpox!*

Toi-Yabe thought it was smallpox! He stared, stricken by a fascination which likewise had its elements of terror. The unfortunate one, who seemed to be breathing his last, had lost almost all vestiges of a human countenance. His eyes were occluded by angry looking knobs, and bumps the size of hazelnuts, and his cheeks were pitted, swollen and bumpy where he had scratched them raw in his frenzy. His neck and arms likewise bore ample evidences of some dread malady—smallpox, perhaps.

Four seconds the sun cured, lank prospector stared, gripped by a fascination and an instinctive fear he did not try to analyze. Then a forced, dry sound came from his throat. He unsnapped the canteen from his belt, unstoppered it. Dropping to one knee, he lifted the head of the sick man, and trickled water into the open, alkali parched mouth. The man choked, was wracked by a sudden spasm—and swallowed some of the water. He choked again, and groaned.

Moved by a quick thought, Toi-Yabe stoppered the canteen, laid the patient's head upon it, and hastened back to the gulch in which he had left the burros. There he delved in one of the packs, bringing up a pint flask of cheap, peppered whisky. Drinking seldom himself, Toi-Yabe was not much of a judge of quality in liquor.

Right then a curious thing happened. Unseen by him while he had been pouring water into the mouth of the supposedly dying man, something small—something striped yellow and black!—had crawled out of the neckband of the patient's flannel shirt. It gained the air again. It darted away suddenly—and then, possibly vengeful, darted back, head-on—and devil-tailing—against Toi-Yabe's right shoulder blade!

As he opened the pint flask, Toi-Yabe suddenly cursed with earnestness and fire. One free hand slapped over his shoulder, hitting nothing but a spot which suddenly had burned like the bite of a rattler!

But there was nothing there. Darting swiftly away was a satisfied little insect demon in yellow and black; but Toi-Yabe saw it not. Nor did he get a chance to compare a sizable and itchy bump well down on his right shoulder blade, with the "pox" on the face of his patient.

ALWAYS thorough, if injudicious, Toi-Yabe gave the cowman peppered whisky, spilled it down generously, interspersing each two dosings with more plain water. Then, when the patient breathed almost normally, and had tried to pry open his puffed eyelids, and even talk between raucous groans, Toi-Yabe went back to the burros. He grimaced wryly at the thought of bedding down a smallpox patient in his new blankets just secured at a holdup price in Hartnett, Nevada, but there was no recourse. The man looked now as though he *might* recover! He seemed past the crisis. He still rambled when he talked; gave every indication of being poisoned to the eyebrows with the virus of his illness; of being in a fevered delirium. But actually Henry Boggs, late of the Circle Rowel Ranch of Demijohn Valley, was drunk! For three good years of his life he had not as much as wetted his lips with whisky or other spirituous liquor.

Henry Boggs had been married three years—since the Chicago World's Fair. The fair had been his one great adventure.

Now Henry Boggs, sick as he was, was drunk—on less than half a pint of peppered whisky! Toi-Yabe flinched when he saw the supposed madman pour out three gurgles of water on the parched ground, instantly snatching up the wetted handful of gumbo, gravel and white sprinkled alkali and smearing the grainy, rasping mess upon his sightless countenance.

"Reduce the swelling—I done heard—mud'll reduce it," mumbled Henry.

Toi-Yabe stepped over, and removed the canteen with its precious contents from the other's reach, but said nothing. He then set his jaw in determination, held his breath, and forced the sick man to lie down on the blankets. "Stay there!" he exploded finally, releasing the pent up air and hurrying away. He rubbed his hands upon the ground, hoping that this grating wash would scrape away the taint. For consolation only, he built a fire, and smoked.

From long gazing into the heart of the tiny blaze, Toi-Yabe could see nothing in the blackness. He heard the thudding of hoofs, though, and got to his feet. He backed from the fire, blinking, trying to make out who it was that came at such a pace toward a desert campfire in the moonless night.

As the hoofbeats of a dozen mounts drummed about the circle of light, Toi-Yabe blinked and crouched low. These were members of a posse? His record was one he preferred to have forgotten; were these riders seeking him?

"Drop them guns! We got yuh covered!" gritted an imperious voice out of the dark. A savage, intolerant voice. Toi-Yabe blinked twice, rapidly, then looked again. He could see a little now. Circled about the fire, at a distance of ten yards, were the vague shapes of horses. Without difficulty, Toi-Yabe could visualize Winchesters and six-guns trained upon him.

The croaking, whisky thickened voice of the sick man came. "Don't fight, podner. It's me they want! I—don't give a damn—any—more—"

So it was that the taciturn, uncompromising Toi-Yabe Tolman, he who had not backed water or surrendered as much as a rooted desire to any one in twelve powder smoked years of life, shrugged lean shoulders, and obeyed. That is, he bent suddenly, and laid his two .44's on the ground; he would not drop them. Then his corded, muscle knotted arms stretched slowly in the air. His eyes slitted as he waited to glimpse the night marauders.

"A'right. What's it all about?" he demanded of his unknown captors.

Grim silence was his answer.

These men who spurred up and dismounted from steaming horses had come for a purpose, and were not explaining. Rather, they were demanding answers to brusque questions. In their eyes he was only an accomplice, inconsequential probably, of the scheming critter they had come to punish, Henry Boggs!

A FIRE was lighted, a mere handful of mesquite twigs that burned yellowly, casting a spectral light over the grim cavalcade. Only three of the band dismounted. They were cattlemen, and had the look of ranch owners rather than irresponsible punchers. Solid men, with many saddle years behind them. And they went about their preparations with no chatter, with the purposefulness of patience long goaded, tried beyond the breaking point. A lariat was looped over the wrists of the sick man, and drawn tight. A second loop of the same rope brought the knees of his bowed legs close together, the feet crossed. Then a second rope was tightened about his puffed, misshapen neck, and dallies were taken on the horn of a stock saddle. The small, nervous roan mare which waited, trembling, for the sting of a quirt on her rump, showed speed in every line.

To Toi-Yabe the whole proceeding was appalling. Plain enough, too. This posse —if it was a posse; not a star or badge showed in the flickering light—had determined to hang its quarry! Lacking a convenient cottonwood, it had adopted the rougher but no less certain method of jerking the victim from his feet by a sudden dash of a speedy pony and dragging him through the rocks and sage until vengeance was sated.

"Wait!" cried Toi-Yabe, imperatively. "You ain't aimin' to kill this hombre while he's sick with the smallpox! I been tendin' him—"

A general derisive guffaw, in which lay grim determination, however, interrupted him.

"Hell, that ain't smallpox; them's devil-tails!" came a voice.

"Bee stings, like our cattle got!" supplemented another.

"Horn out, jigger, an' keep a-goin'!" advised a third. "They's other ropes!"

BUT at that moment the dejected, half-drunken resignation of Henry Boggs split wide open. A shrill yelp of terror cleft his swelled lips. Probably for the first time he realized in its full poignancy just what was scheduled to happen to him within the next ten seconds. "I was takin' 'em aw-a-a-y!" he screeched. "I didn't wa-a-nt 'em! The damn' hive leaked!"

"Yore business; we done tole yuh," was the uncompromising reply.

Henry Boggs swayed and fell sidewise. He had fainted.

"Hell, he's gone an' wilted!" apprised a disgusted voice. "Nemmind. I allus thought he had more guts; but let's git it over with. I don't cotton to hangin' much." The speaker was out of sight of Toi-Yabe.

The prospector had only the most confused idea of what the whole affair concerned. Bees had stung some cattle—and Henry Boggs. Therefore Boggs, who seemingly had been transporting the bees to another neighborhood, had allowed them to escape. The hive had "leaked." To the best knowledge of Toi-Yabe he never had come to close quarters with a bee—until this evening. He suddenly remembered the fiery sting between his shoulder blades, and the funny bump it had left in the skin.

That was the reason for the swollen, "smallpox" look of Boggs' face! He had been stung by hundreds of the devil-tails!

A gasping, horrible sound came from the man on the ground. A member of the execution squad loosened the loop a trifle. There was no sense in choking Boggs to death slow before he got his chance to pray, and hear again what he was dying to expiate.

But the whole proceeding was too much even for Toi-Yabe Tolman, ex-bandit. He had killed men in stand-up fight; and at Silver Peak, in Esmeralda, he had helped swing two notorious high-graders caught red-handed. These men had been tried before a miners' meeting, though. They had had a spokesman. And they had been in full health, defiant to the last—no more afraid of death by the rope than by hot lead.

"Ready?"

"Hell, wake him up. Them bee stings are liable to kill anybody. Two of my whitefaces went mad an' had to be shot." The speaker was one of the three who had dismounted, and evidently a leader.

Toi-Yabe resolved upon him. Suddenly dropping to the ground, taking the slim chance that the attention of the night rider who stood behind now had been diverted sufficiently, he seized the two six-guns, then like a flash rolled as swiftly as he could, bringing all his weight against the calves and backs of the knees of the cattleman.

The astonished ranch owner buckled and fell backward over Toi-Yabe. A shot blazed—but it was not fired at the indistinct huddle there away from the dying fire. The startled riders could not distinguish friend from foe.

A quirt swished through the air, accompanied by a crackling oath. Another of the avenging band, deeming rightly that this was an attempted rescue of Boggs, aimed the cut at the rump of the roan mare. With a snorting squeal she dashed away, her hoofs clattering upon loose rock in the sand.

But fifteen feet of maguey rope trailed loosely! Toi-Yabe's first act had been to seize the rope, and shoot through the fibers, lest the loss of a second spell quick doom for Boggs!

THERE were three figures in a lump upon the ground—Boggs, Toi-Yabe and the ranch owner seemingly locked in an embrace. Startled, the others did not move for a full second. It took that long for Toi-Yabe's only half seen stratagem to be understood. He had released Boggs, and captured Crandall, their leader.

"These guns ain't got triggers, so take it easy, hombre!" advised Toi-Yabe, coolly. "Yuh can get me, but the fust shot aimed thisaway makes my thumbs let go. That's when my big friend here'll git a chance to see the back of his neck—because it'll be spattered out front!"

The heavy man who had led the party, was game. "Go ahead; I'll take my chance!" he rumbled hoarsely. "He's sittin' on top of me, an' I'm on top of Boggs. Drill him!"

"Better not!" snapped Toi-Yabe. He crouched low, and waited, scanning the vague shapes of men who now seemed frozen, at a loss.

A voice snarled: "Think yuh kin git away with this, rock-eater?" it demanded. "Why, we'll have yuh for breakfast soon as it's light enough so's we kin line up Winchester sights!"

"I'll mebbe be in hell by then—with about six of yuh!" gritted Toi-Yabe uncompromisingly. "What I aim to do is palaver brief an' to the point. Yuh better listen. I could take three-four of yuh right now, 'sides this big fellah—" He paused.

There was an involuntary backward movement by some of the nearest. They backed away, bunching at a distance of about twenty yards where Toi-Yabe just could see their aggregate bulk, and no more. In low voices they spoke.

Another slight sound, no more than the

slithering of a rattler through jointed squaw weed, came from behind. Toi-Yabe threw himself sidewise—and in the nick of time. From no more than five yards' distance a six-gun blazed. The leaden slug fanned Toi-Yabe's bare head, in flight.

On the tail end of the same second his .44 spoke. A groan that was half yell, answered. Out there a skulker, the third of the men who had dismounted, leapt up unheeding, and ran, holding pressed to his abdomen a right hand shattered through the palm and first two knuckles. The revolver held in that hand had sped away into the dark, unheeded.

"I'm still hopin' yuh ain't all damn' fools," remarked Toi-Yabe quietly. His voice carried, though. "I ain't got any fight scheduled with any of yuh, an' until now yuh ain't had any reason to kill me. I shot the gun out of that hombre's hand. I could of plunked him between the eyes, an' been justified in any straight cowtown court or miners' meetin' anywheres."

"Not with us, rock-eater!" came the same jeering, threatening voice which had mentioned the Winchesters, and sunrise.

"Shut up, Slim!" came a sharp word. "Maybe they's suthin' we dunno, about this." A murmur from some of the others seconded.

"Huh!" Slim still was scornful, a believer in direct action.

Then again from the more cautious one. "We want to know, big boy! How come yuh horn in here? Is that thar sidewinder Boggs suthin' to yuh?"

"Never saw him or heard his handle afore in my life!"

"We-ll, then what?"

"Has he been tried, an' convicted of somep'n bad?" Toi-Yabe leapt all explanations for the time being.

"Huh!" snapped the irrepressible Slim, recklessly advancing three paces, throwing down his Stetson and stamping upon it. He did not fire, however, and looked disappointed somehow that the interloper had not murdered him on the spot. "Jedged an' warned previous! Hell, what's it to yuh?"

"Come back here, Slim," advised the calmer one, foreman of the ranch owned by the man on whom Toi-Yabe was sitting, if the fact had been known. "Hurry up!"

Ensued then a parley which made plain to Toi-Yabe that at least a modicum of honest indignation really was behind this impromptu ride of the ranchers and cowpunchers. The very rambling method of the foreman's recital showed that the whole mission of vengeance had been decided upon impulsively, but with some undoubted justification.

"A'RIGHT!" broke in Toi-Yabe finally, his brain processes tangled enough by a confusion of talk about bees and whitefaces and warnings. "This ain't the way to do it. I dunno how the cow range has it, but in the minin' country any hombre has a square chance for his life—he goes afore a miners' meetin', a court!

"This-hyar's my proposition. Yuh, Mister Stranger, sits up to one side of a big fire which we'll build. Yuh sound straight, to me. Mebbe I'm wrong, but I don't think so. Yuh'll be jedge. I'll give yuh my six-guns, with one understandin'. If the trial goes ag'in this fellah who's been stung nigh to death, I won't say a word—even if I know yo're all wrong."

There was dissension, wrangling immediately. Slim and two other punchers held out for the speedy annihilation of this "damn' rock-eater." But a voice came rumbling from the torso upon which Toi-Yabe sat, dictating an agreement. Dan Crandall, owner of the D. H. Triangle, had missed nothing. His blood had cooled somewhat, though not his determination to see Henry Boggs sufficiently hanged. Under the arrangement proposed he was certain just then of Boggs' punishment. And he was not unmoved by a certain admiration of this daring, shooting fool who just then rested most of one hundred and ninety pounds upon the small of his, Crandall's, back.

So it was that the half-conscious Boggs, newly dosed with whisky and water by his desert friend, came to what perchance was the queerest court of justice ever convened in the State of Nevada. Toi-Yabe had given over his guns. From that moment he paid no attention to the riders. The latter had black looks for him, but he was not worried. Even Slim came by on foot, a bundle of mesquite branches in his arms, and said, "All right till after the trial an' the hanging! Then I'm goin' tuh write my name on yore carcass, an' pin yore ears sideways on my saddle horn!"

But Toi-Yabe did not look up or speak. He was oblivious even to the snort of disgust vented by the volatile Slim Geddys, who swung on his narrow heel and went after more of the sparse kindling. Toi-Yabe just then was devoting all the arts he had learned in twelve years of desert life and banditry, to the full resuscitation and mental straightening of this man whose life would hang upon an argument yet unknown.

The fire leapt high. It burned red, yellow and light green, but too speedily. Shorty, the foreman who was to act as judge, and who was not unflattered by his selection by the stranger, saw quickly that mere fuel getting on this arid stretch must consume at least an hour.

Toi-Yabe had counted upon that. He was busy, talking in a low tone now to Henry Boggs. The latter had regained use of his tongue. He told a tale at which even the stern featured Toi-Yabe grinned, and once even chuckled. Why, except for its undercurrent of tragedy, this was the primest farce!

Devil-tails! Good Lord, wasn't there as much as one smile waiting to be used in Demijohn Valley? Hadn't these cowmen a single grin amongst 'em?

"However, I don't git jest this, Boggs," said Toi-Yabe, putting his finger unknowingly upon the pulse of the whole affair. "Why was it yuh brung them three hives of bees to Demijohn in the fust place?"

"I—I—" stammered Boggs. "Gosh—" He hesitated. "Well, all I kin say is—er—hmph—I'm married! My wife wanted them!"

"Go on, spill it. Nemmind any women. Yuh said suthin' about usin' a bamboo pole, a fishin' rod. Why didn't yuh? Why'd yuh pick on devil-tails? One of 'em stung me, an' I'd admire to know!"

IN ESSENCE the story told a few minutes later by Toi-Yabe to the cowmen of Demijohn Valley was one of a real, burning grievance. Demijohn Valley was a big range, yet isolated by beetling walls of the Red Chalks. It was watered generously by the curving line of Whistling Creek, a never-dry stream which flowed from under one reddish gray mountain, to snake a way twenty-six miles, measured as the crow flies, and then chute under a hill near the bottle neck of the valley, not to be seen more in this region.

Henry Boggs, rancher, had been a bachelor, quick enough with his guns to be respected, a good hombre with his men, all that, until the winter of 1892. Then came the World's Fair. Henry Boggs heard of it somehow, and after long hesitation, went to Chicago. He took with him three hundred dollars in gold.

He had been there only a little over a week when he wired his bank at Lamar, for more funds. Unquestionably they were sent, but a fever of excited gossip then swept the local range. Had some slick city hombre took the boss?

But Henry fooled them all. In the gondola of a certain Old Mill (admission 5c, six trips for a quarter), Henry, alone in the narrow front seat, was seized about the neck by a plump and terrified maiden, aged 28, from Philbrick Center P. O., Iowa. She was screaming, but quieted as she resisted Henry's futile attempts to break the strangle hold.

But when the cattleman got to ordinary daylight again and saw the lady, blushing now, he decided that mebbe he liked it. The pair, after some debate, bought two six-ride tickets.

And two weeks later Henry Boggs, his tan somewhat faded, but reinforced by a rich and complete beet-blood flush, introduced the smiling but palpably disapproving Mrs. Henry Boggs to four gawping and startled cowboys from the Demijohn range.

That escapade, irretrievable as it was, really wasn't held against him much of any; because Miz Boggs sure was a looker, no matter what else. A lot of cowboys in Demijohn started saving their poker winnings, and wondering when the next Fair was due to happen. They'd of traded places with Henry, quick enough!

But then the trouble came popping. Mrs. Henry had been "raised," she used that word herself, on a black loam farm in Ioway. Always she had wanted a chance to have a vegetable and fruit garden, to "rear" pumpkins and watermelons.

Count One. Henry, following explicit directions, plowed a half acre, sent samples of his soil to the Department of Agriculture at Washington, fertilized according to specifications sent back to him, and then planted! Well, nesters hadn't ever tried to come into the Demijohn! It was unhealthy. When Boggs showed symptoms of nesting—he'd seeded in the pumpkins and watermelons then—a meeting was held at Lobo Lange's. Lobo, who'd been scalped thirty years before, and who'd also lived through the best and worst of two wives, just laughed. He kidded the boys into letting Henry fight his own battle. His new-married son did likewise. Henry was a cattleman, said Lobo, a good one, too. Maybe he wasn't quite such a top hand at gentling an unbroken woman, but give him time. And Lobo chuckled, maybe remembering something.

It didn't work that way. With all the thousands of acres of range and splendid herds of cattle left to the care of the Circle Rowel foreman, Henry—amply bossed by his plump and decisive better half—devoted himself to the little patch of pumpkins and watermelons. He hoed and cultivated, built frames for the luxuriously growing vines, and positively trained each tendril to its proper place! A harried look was in his eyes these days. No good could come of such a flouting of tradition; his cowman's instinct told him that.

Disaster came. The vines attained an almost unbelievable luxuriance on the thoroughly fertilized land, and they flowered profusely. As time went on, however, it was apparent something was wrong. Only a few shrivelled little melons the dimensions of disappointed gourds, appeared—and no pumpkins at all!

MRS. HENRY expressed herself caustically concerning the worthlessness of the West in general, and of Nevada farming land explicitly and in particular. She gathered up some of the misleadingly luxurious vines, still bearing their wrinkled, pathetic little false alarms of melons, and sent them east. In due time a letter from the wise and helpful Department came along.

When Henry read that note, which diagnosed the case and offered two possible remedies, he boiled up scarlet to the ears, but said nothing. The crop was done for this time, anyway. He could be a cattleman again for a few months. Mrs. Boggs sent immediately for a dozen long bamboo fishpoles, one of the artifices suggested for use in dealing with the next crop. But Henry stole away by himself. He eventually answered an advertisement sent out by a seed and supply house at Davenport, Iowa, and left an order for a mysterious shipment to be sent him at the Lamar railhead, the next June. No matter if molten lead were poured into his ears by the hot tongued Mrs. Boggs, he would never use those fishpoles! He'd be heeny-kneed and hooly-podded if he would!

Well, he never did. His shipment arrived long before the vines of the second crop had begun to blossom. The shipment consisted of four hives of half starved, travel jolted, and exceedingly militant bees! Even though their colony of hives, to which they returned always, like the thoroughly domesticated insects they were, was placed in the middle of the half acre of vines, for the present that meant nothing at all in the lives of several hundred thousand hungry buzzers. The moment they were released they became invisible darts, heading out over a landscape amazingly lacking in the common flowers they knew.

Four miles away down the Demijohn a Hereford steer, browsing lazily amid some tender grass shaded by a ranker growth of jointed squaw weed, suddenly wrinkled his nose, and snuffed. Of a sudden then he bellowed, and followed this by raucous squeals of pain and terror! He dashed madly, rubbed his nose on the ground—in vain, for the sting was not on the surface but inside one nostril—and plunged on again. His panic communicated. Twenty-odd confrères, almost ready for the evening hours of ruminance, were frightened too. A small stampede, headed and finally subdued by all the punchers of the B K Trailing N ranch, was the first symptom. It was duplicated within a space of days in even the farthest corners of the Demijohn. Mystery!

"Fur a while we s'posed it was loco weed or pizen larkspur growin' somewheres," elucidated Slim Geddys, who now had gained a moment of undisturbed narration, "but we right soon found out. It was them damn' bees! A cow critter'd go browsin' an' snuffin' thar in the grass like usual. She wouldn't pay no nemmind if they was a leetle yaller striped flower hid down thataway somewheres.

"An' then she'd bite into a bee! That was a stampede, any time, an' it was alla time! An' we didn't have a notion a-tall!

"But then yesterday Bert Nedick here had to shoot a crazy six-year-old blooded bull—worth anyway a couple hundred dollars, that bull was—an' jest to see what the ail of him was Bert stuck his finger up the old boy's snoot. *Zowie!* Bert cussed in ev'ry language known to man, includin' the Skandahoovian; an' he would of gone an' shot up Henry Boggs right then, 'cep' it was his trigger finger what got stung!

"So we give Boggs one chance; tole him to take his damn' devil-tails outa Demijohn so fur they'd all have to carry canteens to git back—an' he didn't do it! So now he swings, the double-crossin' coyote! Barney McGann was settin' on the corral bars, when one of them bees, goin' fast an' careless, hit him square in the nose, an' stung him too! Yuh know, Barney's nose ain't any redder'n a bandana, anyways—"

"MEN," rejoined Toi-Yabe quietly, "I'm glad I happened to be down thisaway. I kin see yo're plumb sore, an' likewise the reasons don't escape me none. I got a lump right between my shoulder blades where one of them damn' devil-tails used his augur an' bit. But I want to ask yuh one question, first off. Some of yuh are married men, I reckon, but I ain't aimin' this personal; no, not any. Jes' s'pose mebbe it had been one of yuh that went to the Fair, an' that same hombre met an' married a gal suthin' like Mrs. Boggs—"

He paused, levelling one index finger at them as he crouched at the fire. The motion made two or three instinctively go for the butts of their holstered guns; they were not accustomed to speechmaking, but the act of pointing, they were trained by bitter experience to know, usually was followed by the violent separation of powder and lead. But this time Toi-Yabe shrewdly was gunless, talking straight to men touchy on the trigger and fully armed. Wise in the simple understanding of such men, he had gained something of an advantage even before he spoke.

"Mebbe *yuh* wouldn't of married her. I dunno. I ain't ever set eyes on the lady. But anyway, Henry here married her! I take it he wasn't no spring chicken, even three years ago, bein' he's nigh forty. He fell plumb in love; an' so, a-course, when the Missus ast him for suthin' he jes' naturally fell over hisself to git that suthin', hell for leather. What hombre here wouldn't, if he was real crazy in love? I dunno so much about the cow country; me, I've allus prospected—when I wasn't holdin' up stages. But in minin' towns down where I come from, a real lovely woman kin have jes' about what she wants—from anybody! I ain't never done no courtin' of a girl, because them few I've seen I wanted to kiss wouldn't look at a homely Joshway tree like me, an' the others—but nemmind. If a lady, like I think this-hyar Missus Boggs must be, ast me for my canteen when I was in the middle of the Dolly Varden Desert, I reckon she'd git it—with the nearest I could come to a smile!

"Any of yuh range men'd keep yore canteens?"

He paused, and a hush unbroken by even the sibilance of a breath, lay about the dulling fire.

"Not me!" ejaculated an unknown puncher at last, getting to his feet to throw more fuel on the fire.

"Not any of yuh!" came back Toi-Yabe instanter. His fist slammed into his palm. "The few cowmen I've come across 've been straight shooters; *that's* why I handed over my guns, jes' on the word of a couple of riders I hadn't even rightly seen! Ev'ry blame one of yuh, s'posin' yuh was in love, would of done jes' exactly what Henry Boggs done! Ain't it true?"

"Huh, mebbeso." A voice from in back. Several other punchers shifted uncomfortably, among them the informal judge.

But Toi-Yabe was not quite through. "Henry Boggs tried to take them bees away, an' would of done it," said the spokesman, "only one of the hives leaked. A few dozen bees got out, stung the hosses—an' then the buckboard was plumb wrecked. All the bees got loose, an' Henry got stung so bad he damn' near died! He would of if I hadn't seen him comin' down here.

"Don't yuh think, honest, he's had enough? He'll snake in them bees again, an' ship 'em away. If yuh hang him, I swear ev'ry damn' one of yuh will hate to look hisself in the glass while he shaves! He'll want to cut his throat!"

"Well, why'd he git them bees in the first place?" snapped Slim.

Toi-Yabe held up the palm of one hand. He took a deep breath. "Men," he said solemnly, "I give my word to Henry Boggs I wouldn't never tell that—onless tellin' it would save his life! It's a secret he don't want to spill, nohow."

"Tell it! G'wan! Shoot!" Various cries prompted him.

TOI-YABE shook his head slowly. He seemed sorrowful. "All right, men, if yuh cain't see yore way clear without it; but gosh-whiz! If yuh hang Henry Boggs now, yuh better go the whole hog an' hang me too while I ain't got my guns; because I jes' couldn't keep on livin' without usin' my hardware on sidewinders like that!

"But I'll tell yuh!" Toi-Yabe's voice dropped to a whisper. He looked furtively over his shoulder, as if fearful of an addition to the audience. Henry chose that most auspicious of all moments to deliver himself of a semi-conscious groan. It was perfect; a stage manager could not have made it more effective.

"Yes, I'll tell yuh—though I hoped yuh'd say it wasn't necessary," said Toi-Yabe, reluctantly. "Yuh see, Henry ain't never mixed with the honkytonk dames; no, not any. He married this-hyar pretty woman an' planned to stick to her. That ain't a crime—where I come from!

"Wa-al, the United States Department of—of—wa-al, farmin'; I fergit the long name—"

"Agriculture," supplemented the rancher on whom Toi-Yabe had sat.

"Yeh, Agriculture; that's right! Thanks. That thar Department said, when Henry told them he'd got a whole lot of flowers for a crop but no punkins to speak of, that it was because the female flowers wasn't fertilized. Yuh know—" And here his whisper dropped to a still lower though more impressive key, "—that there's lady an' he-man flowers, a-courtin', so to speak! I don't rightly understand it, m'self, but that's the truth! If the flowers ain't treated just, gettin' their bouquets of pollen, so to speak, then there ain't no punkins or watermelons ever!

"One way to git that there pollen stuff up in the air an' waftin' around promiskus, is to take them long fishpoles, go out, insert 'em under the flowerin' vines, lift up an' shake hard. The breezes does the rest. A lot of the pollen gits wasted thataway, a-course.

"The other an' better way, accordin' to them who know, is to keep bees. Bees 've got hairs on their laigs. They go walkin' into the flowers, an' the hairs pick up the pollen jest like burrs on angora chaps. Then the bees fly over to the next flower, an' trade in some of that pollen for what they're carryin'. Thataway all the flowers git their comeuppances, yuh might say—and the watermelons grows big an' juicy!

"Now that's a fair half o' why Henry Boggs run bees on this-here Demijohn range. Mebbe yuh—bein' self respectin' men an' decent citizens—kin guess the rest, but I ain't goin' to say it. I'm pretty darn' hardboiled, but I—oh hell, ask him yoreselves if yuh have to know!"

Seemingly overcome with confusion, Toi-Yabe stepped back, raising the puffed and almost unrecognizable Henry Boggs to a sitting position.

"Yeah, why was it? Whaffor yuh—" A clamor of voices came immediately.

"Oh Gawd!" moaned Henry Boggs. But he seemed to realize that supreme effort was necessary right then. His life lay on the conviction he could put into his tones. But there was no difficulty for him to summon soul agony, shame, and even one ultimate shred of defiance.

"Why *didn't* yuh use them fishpoles?" came the demand of Slim Geddys.

Henry Boggs swallowed. He grimaced. A scarlet flush which was deeper even than the colorings of his bee stung countenance, came to the roots of his sandy hair. "Because—" he cleared his throat, and his voice attained a higher pitch—"b'cause, dammit, I've sunk pretty low, time an' ag'in. I've throwed a wide loop. I've helled around. I've—but so help me Gawd, I ain't *never* seen the day I'd mix up in the love affairs of a damn' punkin vine!"

In the ensuing moments of hilarious chaos Toi-Yabe Tolman knew that his first essay as a trial lawyer had ended with a unanimous acquittal for the defendant.

Part Two of the Last Word
in Mystery Stories

The Smiling D

By FRANCIS D. GRIERSON

Preceding events briefly retold

A smiling dead man is discovered in a London doorway by Roger Kent and Peter Felle who are walking home in the fog from a fashionable night club. They report to a near by police station where they run into Detective-Inspector Sims, and Professor Wells, the latter affectionately called "Uncle" by Kent. They find that Wells, a toxicology specialist, has for many years unofficially aided Scotland Yard and is a particular friend of Inspector Sims.

Sims is very much interested in the body they have found because of the smile on the face which is identical with the expression he has seen on numerous other bodies during the last few years. The coroner's report on these cases has always been "death due to heart failure." Both Sims and Wells believe these deaths are not from natural causes, they intend to investigate this case thoroughly and ask Kent and Felle to aid them. Both agree and Kent remembers that just previous to finding the body an apparently terrified girl brushed by them in the fog.

The next morning Kent starts out on a book collecting tour, a favorite occupation with him, but chooses the section of London in which they found the dead man. He really hopes to again see the girl who passed him in the fog. In his ramblings he goes into a strange bookshop, that of Gregory Marle's. Here he sees Marle, Foster, his assistant—and to his great surprise the girl he has been looking for—she is Miss Fayne, Marle's ward.

He goes at once to Sims with this information though he does so reluctantly as he is much taken with Miss Fayne's appearance. At Sims' office he also finds Professor Wells and learns Marle is expected to call shortly to tell something about the dead man and possibly about his death.

Marle appears, first having identified the body at the morgue as that of Señor Garcia, a customer of his. Marle also states that he is afraid young Foster has unintentionally caused his death by attacking him the previous evening, in defense of Miss Fayne, on whom Garcia forced his attentions. Sims says this is impossible as Foster's encounter with Garcia was witnessed, following which each went his way. Also Foster spent the remainder of the evening at a Y. M. C. A. boxing bout where he was seen by many. Marle gave his information about Foster with apparent reluctance telling what he knew only because he deemed it his duty. He seemed deeply agitated and dropped his stick which the professor retrieves for him.

Wells takes the things found on Garcia's body home with him to look them over. He tells Sims that he has found a small puncture in Garcia's neck which escaped the police surgeon's notice. Both feel sure Garcia died from effect of some deadly poison used in a minute quantity.

That evening when Sims calls at the professor's house Wells surprises him by showing a message received by Garcia written in a cross-word puzzle cipher which reads: *Last warning—if pearls are not returned today you die.*

Professor Wells worked this message out from a cross-word puzzle found in Garcia's wallet. This puzzle was done in pen and ink and headed *For the Gazette.* It was apparently intended to be submitted to that paper for publication. It seemed so obviously of no importance that Sims had given it no attention. The professor finding it among the exhibits and being quite a puzzle fan tried to solve it. After working some time on it without being able to cross a single word, he became suspicious

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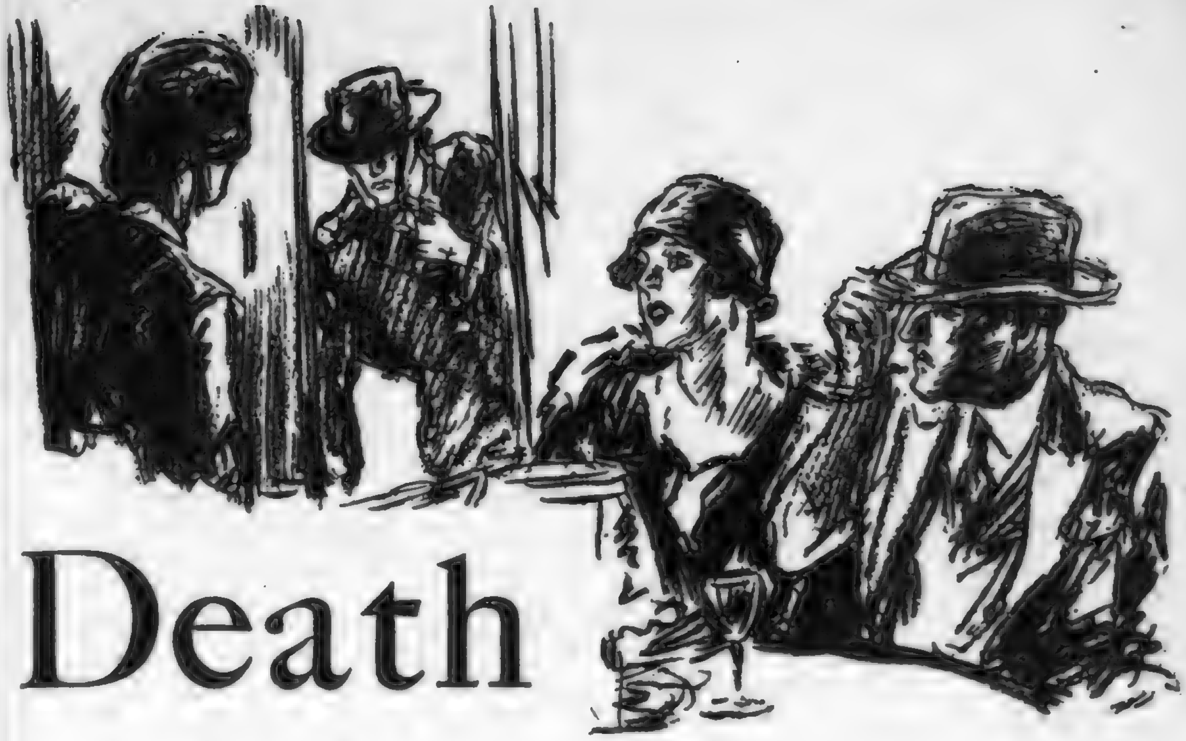


Death

that it was not a legitimate puzzle but some sort of cipher.

The professor further informs Sims that when he picked up Marle's ebony stick the day before it was extremely light considering the size and material. He believes that Garcia was shot with a poisoned dart from an air gun; and that Marle's stick is the air gun. Sims agrees that the suspicion seems reasonable but that motive and evidence must be secured.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE morning following the conversation in which Professor Wells and Inspector Sims discussed the solution of the crossword puzzle found in Garcia's pocket, Roger Kent rose, shaved, immersed his body in water of a refreshing coldness and descended to breakfast with the elation of a man who sees before him an adventure not unpleasantly seasoned with a spice of possible danger. He needed something of the sort, he told himself, as a stimulant.

Prowling about looking for books, taking his mother to a theater, frivoling with Peter Felle: these things were well enough in their way. But there was another, and more serious aspect of life, and it behooved him, as a good citizen, to assist the authorities in their endeavor to elucidate such affairs as the death of this man Garcia.

It was, after all, intolerable that a dear old man like Gregory Marle should be embroiled in such affairs. And it was even more intolerable that a wretched fellow like Garcia should thrust his insulting attentions on an obviously nice and modest girl like Pamela Fayne. True, Garcia was dead, and the girl had nothing further to fear from him. But what had happened once might happen again, and Mr. Marle was too innocent, too old-world to realize the dangers which beset an attractive girl in modern London.

There was, of course, young Gerald Foster. Dislike him Roger could not; there was something very frank and engaging about Foster, he admitted. But Foster was much too young and inexperienced to be a suitable protector for his employer's ward. One never knew what these things might lead to. Pamela Fayne would naturally be grateful to Foster for his well-meant intervention, and rightly so. But Foster might mistake her gratitude for something more, and in his turn become a nuisance, though of quite a different sort.

No, Roger decided, this affair called for the disinterested ministration of an older (but not too old) and cooler head.

In short, the young man, after the manner of his kind, manufactured a number of excellent reasons why he should visit the shop of Mr. Gregory Marle, chiefly because he had not as yet fully realized—or had not allowed himself to admit—the only one that really mattered.

There ensued a comedy that would have been diverting enough for any audience, but of which the humor was lost on its players.

Not wishing to arrive at Mr. Marle's shop too early, Roger dawdled about among his books for some time. Then he walked without haste down to Marble Arch, thinking of many things. For instance, if one kept a shop, did one have one's meals there? (By the bye, did one *live* there, too?) And if not, where did one lunch? A man, of course, could eat anywhere provided the food was sound and the service decent. But, for the sake of argument, what about a girl? Her choice would naturally be more limited. Presuming that one happened, quite casually, to meet a girl who helped in a shop in which one had been and whose guardian one had met and it was just an absolutely accidental meeting in a restaurant (and, after all, one had arranged to go to the shop, where one would naturally be introduced formally some time or other) would it be—

"Oh, *damn!*" said Roger, as he jumped for an omnibus at the top of Oxford Street and climbed cautiously up the stairs to the top.

MEANWHILE Peter Felle, with a very clear notion of what he wanted and a great determination to get it, had arrayed himself with a care which caused the morose Crane to shake his head significantly when he knew that Peter could see him in the mirror, a piece of calculated impertinence which, for once, the outraged Peter had not the courage to resent.

Peter had taken counsel with himself in the night watches, and had decided that while it would be indiscreet at this stage to arrive laden with gold-topped bottles, there could be no reason why he should not add to the revenues of the proprietors of *Claribel* by eating his lunch there. Champagne, he hoped, might occur at another time and place.

After careful consideration, he decided that the earliest moment at which he could discreetly appear at the little restaurant would be half-past twelve. It was not to be expected that he would again be the only customer, for the fame of the establishment would, he was convinced, soon spread to the confines of the city—a reflection which did not cause him unmixed pleasure. Of course, he wanted the show to be a whale of a success for *her* sake; but the idea of casual gay Lotharios languishing admiring glances as they received their food from her hands was less agreeable. Anyhow, he reflected grimly, he would soon chuck any cheeky blighters into the street. Peter's ideas of the commercial side of the catering business were, it will be perceived, vague.

Having broken his fast, he reentered his bedroom, hastily changed his sixth tie for a seventh, and sneaked out of the place before Crane could perceive the alteration. In Bond Street he purchased flowers, and, made his way to Oxford Street, where he swung himself on to an east-bound omnibus which was temporarily held up in a block of traffic.

Somewhat impeded by the large cardboard box under his arm, he mounted the stairs, and as the 'bus started he lurched and almost sat on the lap of the only other outside passenger, sending his pipe on one of the rear seats.

"Awfully sorry," he apologized.

"Not a bit," replied the other cheerfully. "Plenty of room, Peter."

"Not Roger?" cried Peter in surprise.

"I believe so," answered his friend composedly.

Peter pulled himself together.

"Book-hunting, as usual?" he suggested. Roger nodded.

Peter cast about in his mind for a topic of conversation which would divert Roger's speculation as to his, Peter's, destination.

"I've been thinking a lot about that affair of Garcia," he declared mendaciously.

"Ah," said Roger.

"Queer business."

"Very."

"Nothing fresh, I suppose?"

"There is," replied Roger, remembering that Peter had been taken into the confidence of Professor Wells and Inspector Sims equally with himself. Roger was nothing if not loyal.

CONFINING himself to the facts, he briefly described the Scotland Yard conference at which the old bookseller had told them what he knew about the dead man.

As he finished, the 'bus reached the corner of Tottenham Court Road, and he rose.

Peter followed his example, and they got off the vehicle together.

"So that's that," said Roger, endeavoring to strike a note of finality.

"That's that," Peter repeated thoughtfully. "So you saw that girl again? Odd you should have happened to strike that shop."

"Coincidences are much more common than we realize, so Sims says," replied Roger coldly.

Peter, it has been said, possessed a certain shrewdness.

"Oh, quite," he agreed politely. "I say, it's rather exciting, all this—being allowed to help the police, I mean, and all that."

Roger smiled.

"Well, being allowed to try and help," Peter amended. "Anyhow," he added, with some point, "Sims and the Professor wouldn't have told us as much as they did unless they thought we might be useful."

That "we," although unstressed, moved Roger to apology.

"There was no time to get hold of you," he explained, "or of course I'd have let you know what was happening."

"That's all right," Peter assured him cheerfully. "As a matter of fact, I've been a bit busy—about other things."

Roger's eye dwelt for an instant on the cardboard box, on which the florist's name was prominently displayed.

Peter's short experience of war had taught him that attack is often the best mode of defense.

"I say," he exclaimed. "I'd like to have a look at Mr. Marle and—and this young Foster. The shop's near here, isn't it?"

Roger nodded.

"I've got nearly an hour to spare," Peter went on. "Why not stroll up and have a look at the place?"

Roger hesitated for a moment only. After all, there was no earthly reason why—

"Why not?" he answered. "As a matter of fact," he added carefully, "I did half promise Mr. Marle to come and see him—and his books."

"Good enough," responded Peter promptly.

So they made their way to where Gregory Marle sold his books.

ROGER led the way into the shop and nodded in a friendly way to Foster, who rose from his seat and pushed his fingers through his hair.

"Morning," said Roger. "I've been hearing things about you—I'm Roger Kent."

"I know," Foster replied. "Mr. Marle told me about you, and I remembered your coming here, you know."

"Quite," Roger went on. "He asked me to come along and see him, and things."

"Rather," said Foster, with a vaguely hospitable gesture, and glanced at the patient Peter.

"Oh, sorry," Roger added. "This is a friend of mine, Mr. Felle, Mr. Foster."

The two young men made courteous noises.

"He was with me when we found Garcia," Roger explained.

"Ah!" said Foster, whose face had darkened at the dead man's name; "that beast!"

"Bit of a rotter," Peter remarked.

"He was a beast," Foster declared frankly. "I suppose one shouldn't blackguard him now he's finished; *de mortuis*, and all that; easy death, and he was lucky."

Roger hesitated. Apparently Gerald Foster knew something of the suspicions which had affected himself, for he went on:

"Anyhow, its just as well for me it happened as it did. I had a row with him, you know, and it might have looked rather queer. But, as I think you know, Mr. Marle went to the police and cleared that up all right for me."

Roger avoided Peter's eye. He did not quite understand Foster's meaning, but apparently the old bookseller had given a somewhat guarded account of the Scotland Yard interview so as to spare his young assistant unnecessary anxiety.

"Is Mr. Marle in?" he asked.

Foster shook his head regretfully.

"He'll be awfully annoyed at missing you," he said. "He told me he thought you might look in, but he had to go to a sale he couldn't afford to miss. He asked me to tell you how sorry he was, and to show you round a bit, if you like?"

"Thanks awfully," Roger responded. "If we're not wasting your time?"

"Not a bit," Foster assured him. "I'm slack at the moment, just finished rather a big job of cataloguing."

Without more ado he turned to the laden shelves, and even Peter, prepared to conceal boredom beneath a show of polite interest, found himself captured by the genuine enthusiasm with which Foster handled the volumes, now pointing out the beauty of an engraving, now chuckling over the story of how a rare first edition was snapped up under the very nose of a rival dealer.

Roger, although keenly interested in the books, was not oblivious of the fact that floor by floor they were approaching the private offices in which he expected to see a bobbed head bending over a desk.

"And this is Mr. Marle's room," said Foster at last. "He and Miss Fayne work in here."

He opened a door, and Roger's mental barometer fell with a rush as he looked into an empty room.

"They're both out today," Foster explained casually. "As I said, Mr. Marle's gone to a sale, and Miss Fayne is at the British Museum looking up some facts about the feudal system. We do that sort of thing for very special clients," he explained, in answer to Roger's look of surprise. "It's not really part of our business, you know, but sometimes a client will make a collection of books relating to a particular period, and ask us to help him. Of course," he added, laughing, "we charge him a pretty salty fee for our time and trouble."

"Quite," said Roger. "Well, we must be getting along. Awfully good of you to show us round. I'm afraid we've wasted half your morning."

"Not a bit. Come a long any time you like, Mr. Marle is looking forward to seeing you, I know," responded Foster, and presently Peter and Roger found themselves in the street again.

"RATHER a decent sort, that lad," Peter remarked.

"Seems so," Roger agreed. "Well, what about a chop?"

Peter hesitated.

Roger remembered the cardboard box. "Perhaps you're engaged?" he suggested.

Peter had not failed to mark the waning of his friend's literary enthusiasm when he learned that Pamela Fayne was absent, and his conscience smote him.

"Tell you what," he said casually. "I'm going up to a rather jolly little place I've discovered in this quarter. Come and see it."

Roger hesitated in his turn.

"I don't want to butt in—" he began, cautiously.

"Rot!" Peter interrupted. "There's no butting in about it."

He turned and led the way without further words.

For some moments they walked briskly together in silence. Then Peter, unable to contain himself any longer, proceeded to recount to his friend his visit to the little blue restaurant.

Roger, characteristically, refrained from humorous comment.

"Sounds a jolly place," he remarked, ignoring its feminine attraction.

"I suppose," said Peter plainly, "you think I'm a fool. But this girl is different, Roger, if you know what I mean."

Roger's steady step betrayed no hint of the mental jolt his friend's words had given him. *Different.* Why, that was just the word he wanted. There was something about Pamela Fayne that was different. Quite how she was different from thousands of other girls he could not explain, even to himself; but there it was: she was different.

Guiltily he realized that Peter was awaiting his reply. It was amusing, of course, to see the youngster fluttering like a moth round this new candle. But he would take a look at the girl, and see that young Peter did not make an ass of himself.

"I quite understand," he said kindly. "These things just happen, don't they?"

"Exactly," Peter agreed—though just what Roger's words meant neither of them could have said. In point of fact, they meant nothing; but nothing goes a long way with a young man in love, provided that you do not contradict him.

ON THESE excellent terms they came to the *Claribel.* With a hand that was not too steady, Peter opened the door.

The room was empty, but they received the impression that the sound of feminine laughter had ceased abruptly as they entered.

Then from the back room came a just audible voice.

"Hurry up, Bel," it said, and added something further in a lower tone. A smothered squeal followed what sounded remarkably like a hearty thump, and then Peter's face brightened as there came to them the girl he had inadequately described to Roger.

"Oh, good morning," said Peter, smiling nervously.

The girl's color deepened a little, but she replied without apparent embarrassment:

"Good morning."

"I brought a friend round to see your place," Peter explained, nudging Roger.

Roger bowed, and the girl took stock of him with a shrewd glance.

"Thanks very much," she answered. "The more custom we get the better, you know."

"Oh, quite," said Peter, a little dashed by her matter of fact tone.

"Topping place you have here," put in Roger, feeling that he had better say something. "I suppose you—"

He stopped, and stood staring, utterly oblivious of good manners. For from the back room had emerged another girl, who very composedly sat down at one of the tables and began to study the menu. It was Pamela Fayne.

Suddenly conscious of the silence about him, and of the astonished gaze of two pairs of eyes, Roger became desperate—desperation, with him, meant a sort of deadly coolness and the polite determination of a steam-roller dealing with a load of gravel.

Walking across the room, he halted at Pamela's table.

"Miss Fayne, I think?" he said, in his direct way. "May I introduce myself? I'm Roger Kent. Mr. Marle was kind enough to ask me to come round. (He left this part a little vague, and went on quickly.) I called this morning, but just missed you both, and when I saw you here I thought I might venture to anticipate his introduction."

Having delivered himself of this address, Roger sighed with relief and smiled down at the girl, whose clear gaze had met his steadily while he was speaking.

It is, of course, unnecessary to say that she had recognized him. Although on his first visit to the bookshop there had been nothing to warn her that he was even remotely connected with Garcia's death; and although Roger, in his masculine obtuseness, had believed that she had not observed him; she had been able to direct at him one of those fleeting glances which are, for a woman, sufficient for an accurate mental photograph. And Roger, had he but known it, had found favor in her sight.

"Of course; my guardian told me about you," she replied pleasantly. "I hardly expected to meet you here, though," she added, with a hint of question in her tone.

Peter promptly took his cue.

"May I butt in?" he begged.

"This person," Roger explained, "is Peter Felle."

"You see, Miss Fayne," said Peter, "it's like this: Roger lets me run round with him sometimes, if I'm good. So we called to see Mr. Marle this morning, and Mr. Foster showed us things in a very jolly way. Then I towed Roger away and told him about this place. So here we are."

Pamela, infected by his irresistible good humor, smiled.

"Well," she replied, "it seems to be my turn to make introductions now. Bel, come here. This, I believe, is your first customer, Mr. Peter Felle. Mr. Felle, this is Miss Claribel Dene, who has decided that she is going to make a huge fortune out of food."

"Gad, judging by the food I had here yesterday, I should think she would," Peter put in.

"Let me see," said Bel, with affected carelessness; "what was it you had yesterday?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Peter, with a cheerful grin; "but I know it was good, anyhow."

"And this," Pamela went on, coming to her friend's rescue, "is Captain Roger Kent."

BEL turned toward the back room.

"Bessie!" she shouted.

"Hullo?" responded a muffled voice.

"Come here, will you."

There emerged a stout, freckled girl, with a mischievously curved mouth, whom Bel introduced as Bessie Marchant, her accomplice in the work of robbing the public.

"So far," commented Miss Marchant dryly, "the public have—or is it has?—succeeded in robbing us."

Bel laughed.

Peter, who was tugging at the string of his cardboard box, looked up in sudden horror.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "Now I come to think of it, I never paid for my grub!"

They were still laughing when Pamela waved them into silence.

"If I'm not mistaken," she said, "here's more of the public coming to be robbed."

"For goodness' sake sit down and try and look like customers," whispered Bel. Bessie retreated to the other room, and Roger, with great presence of mind, sat down at Pamela's table, which held two, while Peter, pushing away his box, took a seat at another table and began to study the menu upside down as the door-knob rattled and a man entered.

He was a broad-shouldered, powerful fellow, dressed in a blue reefer suit and a bowler hat, and he looked quickly about him with an air of habitual suspicion. His prominent jaw was shaven, but he wore a heavy ginger mustache of the old-fashioned army type.

"Miss Claribel Dene," he said, drawing a folded paper from his pocket and speaking with a strong Cockney accent.

"Yes?" said Bel, interrogatively.

The man examined her from head to foot, but his gaze was inquiring rather than impertinent.

"You are the owner of these here—of these premises," he said, correcting his slip like a man to whom grammar was an acquired taste.

"I am," the girl answered, surprised at his tone. "Do you—?"

He interrupted.

"I am a Metropolitan police officer," he said. "Detective-sergeant Morris, of New Scotland Yard." He waved the folded paper impressively. "I hold a warrant authorizin' me to search 'ere for property alleged to 'ave been stolen."

Bel gasped.

"But you don't imagine—?" she began, and stopped.

The officer, his formal speech delivered, relaxed his severity and removed his hat, revealing a crop of red hair of a hue so fiery that it somehow seemed oddly incongruous with his official dignity.

"You don't need to worry, Miss," he said, with gruff civility. "'Tain't you as we suspect. You ain't been 'ere only a few days. But it's in connection with the man who was 'ere before you. Perhaps you seen 'im sometime?"

"No, I never saw him," Bel explained. "I believe he took the place for an office, for a business he was going to start, and then it fell through for some reason. That's what the landlord's agent told me."

"Did he occupy the place, d'ye know, Miss?"

"He was going to furnish it, I believe, and had got a desk and some other things, but he took them away before we came in. It was all rather a rush—his going and our coming in, I mean."

"You didn't 'appen to 'ear 'is name, I suppose?"

"Yes, I'm sure I did. Now, what was it? Something foreign. Oh, I know: Esteban, that was it."

The officer nodded.

"Well, it don't matter," he said. "Names ain't nothin' but labels, as you might say. You changes them accordin' to what goods you're sellin'."

He chuckled, pleased with his own humor.

"Any'ow," he went on, "I needn't worry you much, Miss. I'll just take a look round an' see what's to be seen. I shan't disturb nobody."

ON THIS good understanding the search began, and if the officer's grammar was weak his eyesight was excellent. With astonishing rapidity he examined every corner of the dining-room, the service-room behind it, and the basement kitchen and scullery, where Bel saved the elderly cook from an attack of hysterics by explaining that the visitor was an insurance agent.

At last the officer declared himself satisfied, and departed, with a clumsy bow to Bel, and an assurance that she was not likely to be similarly bothered again.

As the door closed behind him, Roger, who was sitting nearest to the window, parted the curtains an inch and watched the burly figure walking heavily down the street.

Luncheon was a cheerful affair, the more so because several "perfectly good strangers," as Peter called them, came in, and seemed pleased with the fare provided.

At last even Peter felt that they could not, in decency, stay any longer, and proposed to Roger that they should go—a suggestion received with greater alacrity than he had expected, for Pamela and Roger had got on, Peter privately decided, like a house on fire.

As for Peter himself, he had persuaded

Bel to accept his Bond Street offering, and he felt that she had done so without any great reluctance.

Once outside the door, Roger seized his friend's arm and hurried him away at a great pace.

"I say, what's the hurry?" Peter demanded. "You'll give me indigestion."

"Shut up, Peter!" commanded Roger. Peter subsided, and was presently thrown into a passing taxicab.

"Drive to the nearest telephone booth," ordered Roger, and when the cab stopped he jumped out and immured himself in a box for several minutes.

"Scotland Yard," he said to the driver as he climbed back into the taxi.

"I say, what's the game?" asked the startled Peter.

"Tell Sims about the detective," responded Roger, briefly.

"He probably knows all about it already," Peter objected.

Roger regarded him patiently.

"That fellow," he said, "was no more a detective than you are."

Peter whistled.

"Don't bang the door as you go out," he said. "This is our busy day."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Roger telephoned to Scotland Yard he was fortunate enough to find Inspector Sims in his office. Without going into details, he gave the detective an idea of what had happened, and Sims promptly told him to come down to the Yard at once. When Roger had rung off, Sims telephoned to Russell Square. Professor Wells had just finished a late lunch, and his car was at his door, so that when the two young men, whose cab had been delayed in a traffic block, reached the Yard, Roger was just paying the taximan when the professor's big car rolled smoothly through the gateway.

Wells, of course, needed no introduction. Hearing that Sims was up-stairs, he led Roger and Peter through the somewhat confusing corridors and passages to Sims' little room.

The Scotland Yard staff had long outgrown the accommodation of a building originally adequate to its needs. Quite imposing officials shared offices by twos and threes, and the mere fact that Inspector Sims enjoyed the exclusive use of even a cupboard-like apartment was to the initiated a sufficient indication of his real importance.

The detective greeted them in his pleasant way and they sat where they could, the professor sprawling his long limbs over the only armchair, a battered leather affair of some antiquity.

"Well, what have you people spoiled my digestive period for?" he demanded, filling his pipe.

"Kent has some news for us," Sims explained.

"So the hunting spirit has been aroused, has it?"

"I don't know whether there's much in it," said Roger. "Anyhow, if there is, the credit belongs to Peter."

"Rot!" said that young gentleman promptly. "I only—"

"You can balance your private ledgers some other time," the professor interrupted. "Get on with the news."

Thus admonished, Roger imparted a wooden expression to his countenance as he explained that he and Peter had paid a visit of courtesy to Mr. Marle that morning, and had then decided to lunch at a place in the neighborhood which Peter had happened to discover.

"Rather out of your district, isn't it?" suggested the professor.

"I was having a look round to see what could be picked up," Peter explained.

"And was there anything?" inquired the professor blandly.

"Shut up, Wells," commanded Sims, glancing at Peter's face. "Why the devil shouldn't he look round? It seems to me they've looked to some purpose, between them, anyhow."

The professor chuckled.

"Go ahead, Roger," he said.

Roger went ahead, and as he described the visit of "Detective Morris" he was amply revenged for Wells' flippancy, for both Sims and the scientist listened with an interest even greater than he had hoped.

WHEN he had finished, Sims took up a pencil and made a few notes. Then he sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling for a few moments.

"This is very interesting; very interesting indeed," he said presently. "I don't want to flatter you fellows, but it was very sensible of you to let me know about it so promptly."

"That was Roger's idea; he spotted the bloke," said the irrepressible Peter.

"Shut up, Peter," ordered Roger.

"Well," said Sims, smiling, "never mind that. Now Kent, I want to cross-examine you a bit."

"Right-ho," agreed Roger.

"I've been making some inquiries since you 'phoned me this morning," the detective went on. "Of course, you were quite right in believing that the visitor was not a detective at all, but I should like to know what made you suspect him?"

"I know him," said Roger.

"The devil you do!" exclaimed Sims in surprise.

"I ought to say I knew him. In the army," Roger explained.

"Then how is it he didn't know you?"

"Partly because I kept my head turned away, and he didn't look at me much, and of course this monocle of mine has changed me a bit."

"Any other reason?" asked the detective shrewdly.

Roger flushed.

"I happened to come across him after an attack one day. The boche had hit us a bit of a knock. This fellow didn't belong to my crowd—I'd been up doing Forward Observing Officer and got into a rather awkward hole. Going back, I came across the chap lying on the edge of a shell-hole, about knocked out. He was groaning, and it seemed a pity to waste him, so I lugged him along with me and presently found some stretcher-bearers, who carted him off to a dressing-station. But he wouldn't recognize me: he couldn't have known anybody just then. By the way, he had a short, clipped mustache then, not the great cavalry affair he was wearing to-day. It was his red head that struck me when he took his hat off. At first I couldn't think where I'd seen him, and then I suddenly remembered, in the way one does."

Sims nodded.

"Why didn't you call a policeman and give him in charge?" he asked curiously.

"Perhaps I should have, but I thought it might be better to let him go on and try and find out what his game was," Roger explained humbly. "Sorry if I did the wrong thing."

"Sorry? I only wanted to follow your line of thought. Why, of course you did exactly the right thing."

"You see," Roger went on, much encouraged, "from the minute he came in the chap didn't seem to me to ring true. I was just going to give Miss Dene the tip to ask to see his warrant, when I suddenly thought it would be better to give him more rope, and find out his game."

"Well, knowing that there was a woman running the show, we must admit that it was an ingenious fake. If you hadn't been there, and recognized him, he would probably have got away with it—it was a piece of bad luck he could not be expected to foresee."

"Coincidences are much more common than we realize," observed Peter, and met Roger's glare with an innocent smile.

"But who is he, and what is he after?" Roger demanded.

"As to who he is," Sims replied, "his description sounds uncommonly like an old friend of ours."

HE LIFTED his desk telephone.

"Send Sergeant Andrews up, will you?" he said, and presently there was a knock at the door and a plain clothes officer entered.

"This is Detective-sergeant Andrews," said Sims. "His knowledge of gentlemen of the type we have just been discussing is more intimate than many of them relish. Andrews, just tell my friends what you know of a certain Joe Smith, 'Red Joe', will you?"

"Red Joe, sir?" echoed the sergeant, an alert, baldheaded man with a scar at the left side of his mouth, that gave him an odd appearance of smiling on one side of his face, while maintaining a solemn gravity on the other. "Joseph Smith, generally called 'Red Joe', or 'Red', is a very dangerous man," he went on. "He has been a lot of things in his time—costermonger, professional boxer, bricklayer's laborer, thief, race-course tough, and so on. The best thing he ever did was when he joined the army."

"Captain Kent has just been telling us he remembered the man," Sims remarked.

"He would, sir, seeing that he saved Joe's life," replied the sergeant.

"How the devil did you know that?" demanded Roger, startled.

"Easy enough, sir," answered the officer, grinning. "Knew you immediately I came in the room, Captain Kent. I was one of those that got leave from the police and joined the army 'for the duration', sir."

"Gunners?" asked Roger.

"No, sir. That's what I'd have liked to be in," rejoined the sergeant tactfully. "But they thought I'd be more use in the Intelligence Service."

He stopped, and shot an almost imperceptible glance at Sims.

"That's all right, Andrews," said the Inspector; "you can say anything before these gentlemen."

"You probably know, sir," Andrews went on, "that we had a lot of queer folk in the army. Some of them were just ordinary criminals; others were plain spies, who joined up in the hope of getting hold of information for their employers."

Roger nodded.

"I knew about that, of course," he said. "But I never heard that they got away with much."

"They didn't, sir," responded the sergeant grimly. "One of my jobs was to keep an eye on some of our old friends like Joe Smith. That's how I know about your carrying him out of that hellish bombardment—"

"Was he a spy, then?" Roger cut in hastily.

"No, sir. Red Joe's a queer mixture. He's a crook, and a clever crook, too, considering what little education he's had. There's not much he'd stick at, I think, though we've never been able to fasten any definite charge on him yet. We've arrested him twice, but he's got off each time for lack of enough evidence. But, like many more in the war, he played the game that time. I think myself half his trouble is that any sort of adventure appeals to him more than working for a living. He regards the law as a sort of natural enemy, to be circumvented whenever possible. But in the army there was enough adventure for him. He knew well enough I was watching him, and he came and told me plain that he was going straight until the end of the war. If he'd stayed in the army I believe he'd have been all right, but he didn't seem to have any use for peace-time soldiering, and as soon as he'd got his khaki off back he went to his old games."

"What does he do, in a general way?" asked Roger.

Andrews scratched his head.

"Why, there you've got me, sir," he answered. "I've not been too satisfied about Red Joe for some time. He's more prosperous than he's ever been; always got money to spend, but he doesn't work, and yet we never catch him at any crook games. It's my opinion he's being kept by somebody."

"A woman?"

"No, sir. That's never been Joe's lay. No, I believe he's working on the cross for some big criminal, who arranges his crimes but keeps himself and his chief men out of trouble."

"Listen to this, Andrews," Sims put in, and he briefly recounted Red Joe's visit to the *Claribel*.

ANDREWS' face hardened while Sims spoke, and when the inspector had finished he nodded his head determinedly.

"Well, sir," he said, "I don't pretend to know what game Red is playing, but it's time I paid a little more attention to his doings. Will that be all right, sir?"

"Certainly. In fact, I want you to follow up this matter as quickly as possible, in view of other inquiries I'm making."

"But what do you think this fellow Red Joe was looking for?" asked Roger, as Sims looked at his watch with the air of a man who is going to say, "Well, I hate to hurry you, but—" or something of that kind.

"Looking for?" Sims repeated. "Oh, I don't think there's much doubt about that. I fancy we shall find that the man who took the rooms where the *Claribel* is now was our friend Garcia."

Peter opened his mouth, but Sims held up a protesting hand.

"No, don't ask me what he wanted them for," he implored. "I know no more than you do yourself. But it's fairly evident that—"

He caught the professor's eye, and stopped abruptly.

"Of course," he resumed, "I forgot you have not heard about the pearls. I'll tell you all about that later. Meanwhile, Red is not likely to trouble the *Claribel* again. By the way, I wonder if you fellows would mind going up there now with Andrews? It will save a good deal of time, and I'd like him to have a look at the place. If he goes in with you two, he can have a look round without alarming this Miss Dene, who keeps the place."

Andrews took his cue at a quick glance from his superior.

"It would be very good of these gentlemen, if they wouldn't mind—" he began.

"Rather not!" cried Peter, with great alacrity, and seized his hat.

Roger allowed himself a steady stare, first at Sims and then at the professor, before he rose.

"I'm ready," he said quietly.

"An awkward moment, that," said Sims when the door had closed behind the three.

Professor Wells chuckled.

"Very awkward," he agreed. "The good Roger was not taken in, and the look he gave us said as plainly as words could have done that he considered us a couple of irritating and unscrupulous old fools."

"Which, to a certain extent, is true enough," responded the detective cheerfully. "The question is, how much had we better tell him?"

"We'll have to settle that pretty soon," grumbled the professor; "I'm not going to be looked at like that again."

"If it were not for the girl—" murmured the detective.

"Exactly," retorted the professor dryly.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Gerald Foster told Roger and his friend that Mr. Gregory Marle had gone to attend a sale, he spoke what he believed to be the exact truth. He had, in fact, derived his information as to Mr. Marle's movements from Mr. Marle's own lips, and to have doubted Mr. Marle's word would have been, to Gerald Foster, equivalent to doubting the existence of the solar system or the Marble Arch.

There was no reason why Foster should doubt his employer's word, for Mr. Marle frequently did attend sales, often returning from them the possessor of volumes the subsequent disposal of which excited the envy of other dealers who possessed shorter purses or narrower vision. For Mr. Marle added to a long experience that inexplicable flair which the fortunate may inherit, but never acquire.

But when Mr. Marle, having bestowed a kindly smile and a gracious word on his young assistant, left his shop and made his way toward Oxford Street he put aside—with genuine regret, be it said—the consideration of books and bindings, and turned his thoughts to other considerations.

Gregory Marle was a man of diverse interests. His character was complex. That, in itself, was not strange. Every human being is complex—a whole composed of warring parts in which love and cruelty, avarice and generosity, good and evil struggle for expression.

Mr. Marle's mentality held two main aspects, each so strongly developed as to make it permissible to describe him as a dual personality. As a student and lover of the printed word he was learned and eagerly enthusiastic; as a dealer he was at once astute and honest; as an employer he was generous and urbane.

But the other Gregory Marle was a creature so different as to provoke his own wonder in moments of introspection. There was in his character a vein of cold cruelty due less to an active desire to be cruel than to an indifference to the feelings of others who might suffer through the achievement of his own aims.

The son of a man of moderate independent means and studious habits, Gregory had imbibed a love of books almost with his bread and milk. At the 'Varsity he had keenly interested and profoundly annoyed his tutor. If a subject appealed to him, he would pursue it with unremitting industry, and what at times amounted to an almost uncanny capacity of rapid comprehension. His abilities were undoubted, but he was indifferent to the honors which most men prized.

His father died during his third year, and he left the 'Varsity and traveled for a year or two. His mother was already dead, and he was alone in the world.

It was during this period, while tramping through Italy, that he met Herbert Fayne, then a subaltern on leave from the medical service of the Indian Army. The two young men, totally different in almost every respect, had a common bond of sympathy in their interest in the occult, to which Marle had been devoting some attention. At Fayne's suggestion Marle accompanied him back to India, where together they studied, during Fayne's considerable leisure, such fringes of the knowledge of the East as a white man may come at.

Then it was that Fayne placed Marle under an obligation which was to have far-reaching results.

THE two men, disguised in native costume, had succeeded in obtaining access to the quasi-religious rites of an obscure sect, but an accident roused the suspicions of a guest, and brought about them an ugly mob. Marle was stunned by a blow from behind, but Fayne, a man of great physical strength and cool courage, fought with such desperation that his assailants scattered to obtain more deadly weapons. Profiting by the breathing-space, Fayne picked up his friend and dashed into the interior of the temple, a move for which his enemies were unprepared. After losing his way among the tortuous passages, he came to a small door. Realizing the professional consequences which must follow if his identity were discovered, he passed through, bolted the door behind him, and groped his way along a narrow passage which led him eventually to a garden used by the inner priesthood. Here there was a priest on guard, but Fayne got his hands on the man's throat before he could cry out, and Marle, who had come to himself, found strength to gag and bind him.

With Fayne's aid, Marle scrambled over the garden wall, and eventually they reached Marle's house, where they had assumed their disguises, in safety.

The blow which Marle had received, however, brought on a severe fever, and only Fayne's devoted care and medical skill brought him through.

Soon after this adventure Marle returned to England and opened the bookshop which was to become one of the most successful businesses of its kind in the country.

For some years he had corresponded spasmodically with Fayne, learning of the latter's marriage, of the birth of a daughter and the death of her mother, of Fayne's gradual promotion to the rank of major. But Fayne, more and more devoted to his Eastern researches, never returned to England. He sent his little girl Pamela home to be educated, and Marle saw her occasionally at her school until she went out, a long-legged chit of fifteen, to rejoin her father.

Then came the news that Major Fayne, accompanying a punitive expedition to subdue a revolt of fanatical tribesmen, had been killed in a frontier skirmish.

It was, of course, natural that Fayne should have foreseen the possibility of such an event. Gregory Marle, knowing his friend, was not much surprised to find that Fayne had very definitely believed that he could forecast his own end. But it certainly did surprise him to receive a letter confiding to his care Fayne's daughter, Pamela.

In this letter, written some days before Major Fayne set out on his last expedition, he recalled to Gregory Marle their adventure years before in the temple, and reminded him that when he had recovered from his illness, he had voluntarily pledged himself to requite Fayne's preservation of his life by any means which might lie in his power in the future.

TO GREGORY MARLE the charge of a young woman was an appalling prospect. It was not a question of money. Marle was incapable of petty meanness. Besides, he gathered that Pamela Fayne would be well provided for; her father had left her a couple of hundred a year, and there was, besides, her pension as the daughter of an officer killed in service. It was the sudden introduction into his quiet establishment of a girl who would probably require to be amused.

But one of the strongest traits in Marle's character was an almost fanatical regard for his pledged word. He did not give it lightly; but, once given, he would beggar himself or sacrifice his very life sooner than dishonor it. It would have been a more admirable quality had it not been based on sheer pride rather than goodwill. Marle liked to know that men spoke of his reliability, his decisions unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

So, with outward composure and inward foreboding, he instructed his elderly housekeeper to prepare for the coming of Pamela.

Fayne himself had been a man of few friends, and when he married a woman whose people had expected her to make a much better match from a worldly point of view, he had been bitterly wounded by their open disapproval. When, therefore, she died, he refused to allow Pamela to accept the hospitality they tardily offered.

Marle lived in a roomy old house, much

too big for the simple requirements of a bachelor. But he liked to be near his shop, and consequently secured the house when it came into the market, living in a few rooms, and closing up the remainder.

When the quiet, self-possessed girl arrived from India, motherly Mrs. Penn, the housekeeper, metaphorically took her to her ample bosom. Gregory, at first uncertain how to treat this new responsibility, soon found that Pamela was well able to take care of herself. He took her to theaters and exhibitions, at first as a matter of duty, and presently found himself taking pleasure in her healthy enjoyment of these things. She, on the other hand, took to spending hours in the bookshop, and accompanied him to sales, showing an interest and a degree of intelligence that surprised her guardian, for such, by her father's will, Gregory was appointed until her twenty-fifth birthday.

Gradually Pamela became more and more useful, though, to do him justice, Gregory protested against her increasing industry, for she would take no payment for services which, he frankly told her, were daily becoming increasingly valuable.

So the weeks became months, and the months years, and Pamela, to whom a station ball or *gymkhana* had once represented the height of happiness, adapted herself to her surroundings with less difficulty than she had secretly anticipated, and began to discover new and fascinating interests in life.

It was not, however, until that day in the *Claribel*, when Roger Kent sat opposite to her eating a prosaic chop and listening with profound interest to her views on the weather, the running of restaurants, and other topics, that she began to suspect that she had discovered the most fascinating interest of all.

CHAPTER X

MR. MARLE, as has been said, made his way toward Oxford Street, crossed that busy thoroughfare, and turned out of it into one of those narrow streets which lead into the heart of Soho.

It is an accepted truth that nowhere is one so lonely as in a crowd; nowhere, too, is one so safe from observation as in a crowded area of a big city. In a village the stranger is marked and his proceedings are matter for lip-licking condemnation; in cosmopolitan Soho most people are too much interested in their own affairs to concern themselves with the affairs of other people who do not actively injure or benefit them.

Consequently Gregory Marle, once immersed in the sea of Soho, attracted no more attention than would a doctor who discovered a cure for cancer, or otherwise benefited the human race, if he found himself accidentally mixed up in a crowd of film stars or stage favorites at a garden party.

Geographically, of course, he was a comparatively short distance from his shop; but distances in London are not geographical. One may find within a mile, or less, two areas as different from each other as though they were planets moving in different orbits, and almost as little likely to meet.

Nevertheless Mr. Marle, who never took unnecessary risks, observed a certain invariable procedure on his visits to the quarter.

In one of the busiest streets he stopped outside a shop where a fat, voluble Italian kept cigarets, snuff, picture postcards, luridly covered novels and a score of other things jumbled in apparently inextricable confusion. On each side of the doorway hung a string of French and Italian journals, and at these Mr. Marle glanced with the mild interest of a casual passer-by.

His pause, however, enabled him to glance unostentatiously up and down the street in case some acquaintance of his, sauntering through the quarter, should wonder at the bookseller's appearance in a street so little associated with rare editions and bindings. It was unlikely enough, and still more unlikely that such a prowler would give the matter more than a moment's thought. But Mr. Marle knew that the only thing one can rely on with a reasonable degree of certainty is that the other man will do what one does not want him to do.

SEEING no familiar face, Mr. Marle slipped through a narrow doorway so close beside the shop door that at a little distance he might have seemed to be entering the shop itself. The narrow doorway, however, gave access to a narrow passage, and a narrow flight of stairs which led to some small rooms above the shop. One of these rooms Mr. Marle rented. To the Italian proprietor he would, in Rome or Venice, have been the subject of lively speculation; in London, he was merely one of the more incomprehensible of the incomprehensible English, but punctual as the sun in paying his rent. It was, the *padrone* understood, necessary that his tenant should observe all sorts of conditions of men so that he might describe them accurately in a great book he was presently to write. The better to make such observations, the elderly gentleman was accustomed to garb himself in raiment of varying, and usually humble, types, rather than his customary rather formal dress. For the rest, the *padrone*, a true Latin, was quick to perceive that if his tenant chose to adopt something of a disguise, however innocent his purpose, he would continue to produce his rent with the same clock-like regularity just as long as the privacy for which he paid was respected. Therefore the *padrone's* energetic tongue discoursed fluently on a great variety of subjects which did not include his elderly tenant.

Mr. Marle had chosen this particular establishment for several reasons. For one thing, it stood in a busy street, and comings and goings are much less noticeable in a busy street than in a quiet one. But its chief advantage lay in the fact that the narrow passage from the front door, passing the foot of the narrow staircase, penetrated the depths of the house, and ended in a small yard. A doorway in this yard led into an alley which in its turn conducted the adventurous explorer into another street, scarcely less busy than the first.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor, the bookseller unlocked the door of a small room. Its plain and rather shabby furniture had seen long service, but the apartment was scrupulously clean, kept so by the *padrone's* wife, who was provided with a duplicate key for the purpose.

But if the key gave access to the room, it was no open sesame to what secrets it might contain. Woman-like, the *padrona* had cast many a curious glance at two tall cupboards, Mr. Marle's sole contribution to the furnishings of the room. The cupboards were massive and strong, and their doors were fastened with locks which, had she known it, would have defied a more cunning hand than that of the *padrona*.

Unlocking one of the cupboards, the bookseller took from it a suit of blue serge, the jacket double-breasted, with heavy lapels. Dressed in this, with a low, turn-down linen collar and a blue tie spotted with white, he looked a different man. A careful study of the art had taught him that a successful disguise depends less on the make-up box than on a skilful adaptation of the peculiarities already possessed by the subject. Paint and powder by themselves can not hide a person's identity from a trained eye.

Mr. Marle, in his blue suit, would not have been recognized by his book-buying clients simply because not only his clothes, but his gait, and even a certain fixity of facial expression, had utterly changed his appearance. He looked, as he dressed to look, like the master of a large cargo steamer. A "bowler" hat—for your sea-captain, once ashore, would as soon wear his peaked and badged cap as he would carry an anchor or a pair of binoculars—and a carved wood stick that savored of the East; a judicious touch that lent to his pale, student-like face the dull brick hue of the man whose skin has been buffeted by wind and whipped by flying spray; and Gregory Marle might have passed unheeded in any muster of men who had gone down to the sea in great ships since their youth.

LOCKING the door behind him, Mr. Marle descended the stairs, but instead of turning toward the doorway by which he had entered, he followed the passage to the back of the house, crossed the little yard, and passed through the alley into the midst of the hurrying throng. A few minutes' walk brought him to Piccadilly Circus, where he swung himself with just the right degree of cautious deliberation aboard a 'bus temporarily held up in a block of traffic. Alighting near Charing Cross Station, he crossed the Strand and descended the slope of Villiers Street to the Embankment station of the underground railway, where he caught a train to the Monument Station.

Emerging from the depths into the shadow of the great Monument from the top of which one may survey a generous slice of London, he turned down Fish Street Hill and so into Lower Thames Street; a salubrious thoroughfare chiefly remarkable for a strong odor compounded of dried fruits, ships' stores, publicans' customers and mixed garbage. Men in overalls and enormous clogs lounged against walls or plodded heavily between warehouse and wharf, bearing burdens poised on shoulders protected by an odd garment which began as a headdress and grew into a sort of cape.

The buildings that lined the street varied from large warehouses to blocks of offices, the exteriors as dingy as the interiors were shabby. In the latter, narrow and almost rickety wooden stairs led to poky, ill-lighted rooms in the corners of which the grime of centuries seemed to have accumulated.

Entering one of these buildings, Mr. Marle climbed to the second floor. On a door in front of him was painted, in time-soiled letters

T. MORGAN
AGENT
SHIPS SUPPLIED

Opening the door without knocking, the bookseller entered a small room, furnished with a deal table and a few chairs, a cupboard, some books and an old-fashioned copying press. A few samples of articles used in a world of shipping lay about, dusty and neglected.

As Mr. Marle closed the door behind him, the faint sound of a key turning in a well-oiled lock was heard, and the door of an inner room opened.

Nodding curtly to the man who appeared in the opening, Mr. Marle walked in, placed his hat and stick on a table and sat down in an armchair.

This inner room, although by no means luxurious, had greater pretensions to comfort than the outer office. A table at one side held a row of ledgers and files, and there was a big, flat-topped desk in the center of the room, with an armchair on each of its two sides. A low bench-seat stood beneath the window, and two massive iron safes bulked heavily at the far end of the room. A telephone was affixed to a swinging stand clamped to the desk, and a typewriter stood on a smaller desk in a corner.

Despite the discouraging appearance of the outer office, the inner room suggested that the agency of T. Morgan, Agent, was no sinecure.

MR. MARLE leaned back in his chair, drew his snuff-box from his pocket, took a pinch, and fixed a keen glance on the man who stood opposite to him.

"Sit down," he said curtly, and the man obeyed.

He was a small, wiry fellow, with shifty eyes and thin lips, and he moved in a noiseless, furtive way, unpleasantly suggestive of a ferret. When, presently, he spoke, his voice was low and almost toneless, and he slurred his words with an ingratiating smoothness.

He usually kept his left hand in his coat pocket, or rather, what would have been a normal person's left hand, for his arm ended in a steel hook. His hand had been amputated in early life, and he had often been asked why he did not use one of those artificial hands which modern science has contrived so cleverly. He always replied that he had got used to his hook, and was too old-fashioned to change. But those, and they were few, who were honored with T. Morgan's intimate friendship, smiled at this excuse. For T. Morgan, known to a limited circle as "Hooky," could put his hook, to say nothing of other implements which he could screw into its socket in place of it, to a variety of uses.

"You received my order?" asked Mr. Marle.

Hooky elongated his slit of a mouth into what he intended to be a respectful grin.

"Yes, Chief," he replied.

"Very well. Where's the week's report?"

Hooky took a typewritten sheet from a drawer and handed it across the table. Mr. Marle read it in silence. As he came to the end, a tiny electric globe affixed to the desk glowed redly, and Hooky rose and crossed to the wall. Here a small hole had been pierced, concealed in the outer room by the woodwork of a mirror. The opening of the outer door completed the circuit of wires connected to a small battery. The glowing red light informed Hooky, without indecent commotion, that a visitor had arrived. Two strides took him to the peephole, through which he could observe the caller without being himself observed.

Sometimes the outer room was occupied by an urchin believed to be Hooky's son, who divided his time between reading penny dreadfuls and practising card tricks of a kind designed to deceive an opposing player.

"RED JOE," Hooky announced, after a glance through the hole, and Mr. Marle nodded.

Unlocking the door, Hooky greeted with an oddly affectionate smile the squarely built, red-headed man who gave him a curt nod as he strode into the inner room and removed his hat in a sort of half defiant, half respectful salute to the bookseller before seating himself on the window bench.

Mr. Marle swung his revolving chair round a little so as to face Red Joe, at whom he gazed with a cold concentration as impersonal as though he had been looking at a horse for sale.

"Well, Smith," he said presently; "you visited the restaurant?"

Red Joe nodded his red head.

"Did you find anything?"

"Not a blawsted thing," replied the other. "Nor I didn't expect to, neither," he added bitterly.

In Mr. Marle's eyes flickered a light that made Red shuffle his feet uneasily.

"What you expect, or do not expect," said the bookseller slowly, "is of no importance. Be good enough to remember that in future, will you?"

Red muttered something half inaudible, and Hooky looked apprehensively from one to the other.

Mr. Marle, however, waved his hand in contemptuous dismissal of Red's opinions.

"Garcia was a clever man," he said. "It was a pity that we were forced to dispense with his services."

"An' I don't rightly see why we should 'ave," grumbled Red. "You won't find it so easy to fill 'is place."

Mr. Marle leaned forward.

"Manuel Garcia," he said, "did one thing that I will allow no man to do: he forgot that he was the servant and I the master. So he died. I hope that I shall not have to take such severe action again," he added significantly, "but I shall not hesitate to do so if it should be necessary."

"I'm sure Red didn't mean—" began Hooky nervously, but Red turned on him savagely.

"Shut yer blawsted mouth, Hooky," he said. "I don't want no one to make excuses for me. Look 'ere, Chief, it ain't no good yer tryin' to frighten me."

Mr. Marle laughed unpleasantly.

"My good fellow," he retorted, "I should not even waste one of Hooky's little poisoned darts on you. I could hang you tomorrow, by simply giving the police a little information which would interest them very much."

Red sprang up in a fury.

" 'Ang me?" he snarled. "Not so much of that 'angin' talk, Chief. I ain't no murderer. I'll 'ave a go at any man in fair fight, an' if he croaks, it ain't my fault. But I ain't never done a *murder*—"

He stopped, as Mr. Marle brought his hand down on the desk with a sudden crash.

"Listen to me, Smith," cried the bookseller sharply. "You are not a fool, and you know that I mean what I say. *I could hang you, and Hooky as well, tomorrow*, and nothing you could do to me would prevent it. Do you think I'd be mad enough to sit here alone with you men if I hadn't taken my precautions?" The angry note left his voice and with a characteristically abrupt change he laughed gently. "Really, my dear Smith," he said smoothly, "you and Hooky should spare no effort to protect me, for I have so arranged matters that if anything unpleasant should happen to me, Scotland Yard will receive within a few hours information which will explain one or two little problems they would give a good deal to solve."

He turned to the desk and took up the typewritten report he had been reading when Red came in.

"Now," he said, with the air of a man who brushes aside trivialities to address himself to a matter of real importance, "now let us see what can be done with this inquisitive scientist, Professor Wells."

CHAPTER XI

PROFESSOR WELLS was fond of saying that surprize is one of the least useful of human emotions. He had seen so many surprising things during his medico-criminological experience that he had some justification for that view.

Nevertheless, a couple of days after Mr. Marle's conversation with Red and Hooky, the professor received one of the greatest surprises of his career.

He had just finished lunch, and was sitting in his library, sipping his coffee and turning over the pages of the current issue of the *British Medical Journal*, when a visitor was announced.

The visitor was Mr. Gregory Marle.

That, in itself, was not startling. It was not unnatural that the bookseller should seek to cultivate the acquaintance of a man for whose work he had expressed such admiration, and who, besides, was closely connected with the tragedy which had been the means of their introduction.

But the professor, as he rose to receive his visitor, was far from suspecting the object of the bookseller's visit.

"I trust," said Mr. Marle in his precise way, when Wells had established him in an armchair and had resumed his own, "I trust that I have not interrupted you—" He glanced at the journal which had fallen to the floor.

"On the contrary," replied the professor, smiling, "I was drowsing over a dull article, and wishing that I had some one to talk to."

Mr. Marle took a pinch of snuff, composed himself comfortably, and gazed at his host with an oddly whimsical smile.

"Well, since I have thrust myself on you, I must at least try to be less boring than the article you speak of," he said. "In point of fact, I have come—with your permission—to talk about yourself."

Wells opened his mouth to protest, but his visitor went on:

"Believe me, it is a subject of mutual interest. You will, I know, acquit me of merely gross flattery when I repeat what I said to you before: that I have some little understanding of the great services you have rendered to science."

Wells frowned slightly, but he acknowledged the other's words by a slight nod.

"Therefore," Mr. Marle added gently, "I should deeply regret it if the scientific world should be deprived of those services."

The professor smiled.

"Fortunately," he answered, "my health is sufficiently good to encourage me to hope for at least a few years' more work."

"I am delighted to hear you say so," replied the bookseller smoothly. "Nevertheless, it is unhappily a fact that the most robust constitutions are helpless against those accidents to which we are all so subject in these bustling modern days."

Professor Wells drew his pipe from his mouth and regarded the bookseller critically.

"I did not know," he said deliberately, "that you had added an insurance agency to your other activities."

Mr. Marle laughed quietly.

"Nor do you believe it for an instant," he replied. "Come, come," he went on, "this fencing would be all very well for actors or amateurs, but between—may I say?—such men as ourselves, it is a waste of time."

"I'm afraid I do not follow you," said the professor woodenly.

Mr. Marle tapped his snuff-box in half humorous impatience.

"Well, I suppose you are right to be cautious," he said. "For my part, I am quite sincere. I will even adopt your own suggestion, and say that I have come here in the capacity of an agent who is extremely anxious to preserve a life so valuable to humanity as your own."

"And your premium?" asked Wells coldly.

"Now, is that quite worthy of you?" Mr. Marle demanded. "Nevertheless, I refuse to be annoyed. My premium—again to use your own word—is not a heavy one. Let me say at once that I am quite aware of your connection with the police; indeed, I have known of it for a considerable time."

"You are well informed," remarked the professor.

"It is my business to be so."

"As a bookseller?"

"As a bookseller, certainly."

"And doubtless for other reasons also?"

"For other reasons also, as you say," Mr. Marle agreed, not at all disturbed by the suggestion. "I am sure that in your double capacity of scientist and amateur of criminology, you have learned many secrets. You cannot complain, therefore, if others have learned some of yours."

THE professor glanced a little ostentatiously at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Forgive me if I say that I do not quite see the object of this conversation," he said.

"And forgive me," answered the bookseller, "if I reply that you see it perfectly plainly. But since you prefer it, I will be quite frank with you: I am aware that you have lately devoted your very dangerous talents—dangerous, that is, to those opposed to you—to a scrutiny of my proceedings. That scrutiny, Professor Wells, is at present harmless, but I will not pretend that it might not presently become inconvenient. I have come to ask you to direct your attention to other matters."

He paused, and took a pinch of snuff with a coolness that made Wells smile despite himself.

"You are certainly not diffident," he remarked.

"Why should I be?" Mr. Marle retorted

"In business, it is a good rule to ask for what you want."

"You don't always get it."

"True; but that, I think, depends partly on the way you ask for it, and partly on what you are prepared to offer in return."

"And what are you offering me, for instance?"

"Your life."

Professor Wells knocked the ash from his pipe, and refilled it carefully. When he had lighted it, he resumed the conversation.

"Do you know, Mr. Marle," he remarked, "that what you have just said amounts to a threat of homicide?"

Mr. Marle shrugged his shoulders.

"Threats of that nature," the professor went on, "should either be ignored or passed on to the police to deal with."

"But in this case," the bookseller put in, "there is the unusual fact that the threat is made to some one who is himself practically one of the police."

The professor regarded him attentively. "You are a singular man, Mr. Marle," he said.

Marle waved his hand.

"That," he answered, "is the nicest thing you have said since I came. I see that we are going to understand each other."

"I think," Wells retorted, "I understand you very well already."

"I wonder. You suspect me of many things, but you really *know* very little, I think."

AGAIN the professor regarded his visitor with a keen gaze. More than once Wells had listened to the confession of a criminal whom he had run to earth. But it was a new experience to have a man voluntarily discussing the question of his own guilt or innocence, with the coolness of a practised card-player estimating the value of a newly dealt hand. Somehow, he could not believe that it was mere bluff; Marle was not the sort of man to indulge in useless gestures.

With characteristic independence, Wells came to a decision,

"Very well," he said; "if you are anxious for frankness, you shall have it. But it is only fair to warn you, Mr. Marle, that my position is stronger than yours: I am not a policeman, therefore I can talk to you outside the circle of official regulations; but I am associated with the police, and I shall certainly tell them anything I learn from you that they don't know already."

MR. MARLE tapped his snuffbox, and nodded with obvious satisfaction.

"Of course," he agreed; "it is fair enough. Your warning was unnecessary, but I am glad you gave it, all the same, for I am old-fashioned enough to appreciate a spirit of sportsmanship even in these matters."

"Honor among thieves," Wells suggested slyly.

"Not at all," Mr. Marle retorted quickly. "Nobody knows better than yourself the absurdity of that saying. The average criminal would betray his own brother for a quart of beer—always provided that he ran no risk of being found out. But I venture to think that you do not include me in that category."

"I certainly do not consider you an average criminal," replied the professor ambiguously, and Mr. Marle laughed softly.

" 'Approbation from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed,' " he quoted quaintly. "But we are wandering from the point. I was saying that you really *know* very little about me."

"That little, however, is quite interesting," Wells pointed out.

"Oh, I realize that you have not been idle since I stupidly dropped my stick in Inspector Sims' room and you picked it up for me," said the bookseller. "It was an unfortunate accident."

"For you."

"For me, of course. But that would not have been sufficient to arouse more than a passing curiosity by itself."

"Your denunciation of young Foster was a trifle strong."

"It was; I recognized that afterward. But I hoped you and Mr. Sims would attribute it to the rather hasty judgment of a stupid old man."

"You speak of sportsmanship, yet you were cheerfully prepared to send an innocent lad to the gallows."

"I beg your pardon; you do me less than justice there. I wished you to *think* I believed Foster guilty, but I already knew that the charge could not be sustained."

"Then why try to throw suspicion on him?"

"To confuse the issue, and to divert your attention from other inquiries."

WELLS frowned and sucked at his cold pipe, struck a match and relighted it.

"Does it strike you that this is an extraordinary conversation?" he demanded.

"Extraordinary: that is, not ordinary," Mr. Marle responded. "Would it be conceited to suggest that we are not ordinary men?"

"I still do not understand why you have come here," Wells persisted.

"Surely I have made that clear?" Marle replied. "I have a sincere admiration for your great abilities, and believe me, Professor Wells, I have a certain code of my own, although it may not be that of the man in the street. You have chosen to interest yourself in my affairs. I know all about your recent inquiries—at least, I believe I do. The somewhat seedy individual who was so anxious to interest the Soho shopkeeper in a new fire-insurance scheme; the bewildered Indian gentleman who did not know his way about London, but who chanced so strangely to take the same underground train as I did, and to follow me until I threw him off the trail by a little stratagem—my good sir, did it not occur to you that a beard may lend itself to certain disguises, but it is in itself rather a dangerous identification?"

Wells colored; then he laughed.

"The truth is," he admitted frankly, "I did not think you had any idea that I was watching you."

Marle pointed to a small table in the corner.

"I see a chess-board over there," he said. "Surely that great game should have taught you the danger of underrating an opponent? But all this is by the way. Let us come down to essentials. You are perfectly well aware that I would not be sitting here in your room at this moment if I did not know that there is not a single charge you could bring against me which would hold water. Come, I have been frank with you: be equally so with me."

"At the moment, that is literally true," the professor admitted, concealing his chagrin. "But the mere fact that you ask me to abandon my investigations shows that you are afraid of their results."

"Not at all," declared the bookseller. "You must allow me to contradict you at once. In the first place, I have merely to cancel certain arrangements I have made, and you are helpless, for up to the present you yourself admit that you can do nothing. But I do not propose to have my plans disarranged, and I warn you plainly that if you attempt to do so, I will take steps to prevent you from interfering in anybody's business again."

Professor Wells smiled, lifted an imaginary tube to the level of his mouth, and blew strongly.

"Not at all," said Marle coolly. "Only a fool confines himself to the use of one weapon. But we need not discuss that."

"What I cannot understand," said the professor reflectively, "is how a man of your tastes and education came to associate himself with crime. I have met a good many types of law-breakers, but I don't remember one quite like you. Of course, there was that remarkable character, Andrew Bitterne Craige, but he was mad—"

"While I appear to be at least reasonably sane?" Mr. Marle put in, smiling. "But you yourself have pointed out in more than one of your books the fact that sanity is one of the most difficult things in the world to define."

PROFESSOR WELLS rose and took several turns about the room. Then he stopped and looked down at the bookseller with a puzzled frown.

"Mr. Marle," he said, "let me ask you a plain question: why do you—a man of culture and, I believe, of kindly feelings—do this sort of thing?"

The bookseller's thin fingers tightened about the snuff-box he still held, and he smiled bitterly.

"I wish," he answered, "that I could make my reply as brief as your question. After all, it was I who came to you, not you to me, and it is only fair that you should understand the situation, as far as I can make it plain. Even as a lad I had what most people would consider unorthodox ideas about right and wrong. Later on, as I believe you know, I went to the East, and there, in addition to a good deal of very useful information connected with drugs and other things, I learned that there are domains of thought which are as yet undreamed of by the mushroom civilization of the West."

He paused.

"I, too, have visited the East," said the professor quietly.

"Ah, so much the better," cried Marle. "I need not dwell on the matter: the point I want to make is that I have long since discarded the narrow code of morals into which our laws try to compress human intelligence and endeavor."

"But society can only protect itself and retain its cohesion by means of a legal code," Wells objected.

Mr. Marle nodded contemptuously.

"In a sense that is true," he conceded. "That is, today the common herd must be controlled, just as a bull must be prevented from entering a china-shop if breakages are to be avoided. But I certainly do not propose to accept for myself the rules and regulations made by a set of dullards with no more imagination than the clods they attempt to govern."

"If you do not like the laws of the land you live in, why live in it?"

Mr. Marle shrugged his shoulders.

"It suits me," he explained coolly. "Among other reasons, because the police are so stupid."

"*Touché*," cried Wells, laughing.

"Oh, you know quite well that that was not meant for you," the bookseller protested. "Indeed, I ought to qualify my words: it is not so much that your English detective is naturally stupid—your friend Sims, for example, is far from being a fool—but the system under which they have to work forces them to act stupidly; they are bound by so many written and unwritten laws that they can deal successfully with very little beyond petty larceny and Saturday night drunkenness."

"There is, however, an official called the public hangman," said Wells dryly.

"And he has so little to do," Marle retorted, "that he usually ekes out his living by cobbling, or some other humble occupation."

"You consider yourself, then, superior to the law by virtue of your intellectual qualities?"

"Certainly—and I grant the same freedom to you, or to any other man of similar mental caliber," said the bookseller readily.

"It seems to me a little difficult," Wells suggested, "to determine to whom such freedom should be granted or refused."

"My own criterion," replied Marle dryly, "is the degree of success with which I practise what I preach."

THE professor's face hardened. With something of a shock he realized the subtle charm of this singular man's conversation. But, he reminded himself if his suspicion was correct, Marle was responsible for more than one cold-blooded murder.

"Your arguments are plausible enough," he said shortly, "and I will do you the justice to add that I believe you to be sincere. But your views are distorted. There can be no justification for murder committed for gain."

"Murder?" repeated the bookseller, unmoved by the other's warmth. "Murder? It is a word used by the ignorant with a sort of religious awe. But let us call it the taking of a life. The law permits the hangman to take life. Public opinion not only permits, but encourages the soldier to take the life of a man wearing a different uniform—a man he has never seen before and against whom he can have no personal animosity. You are suggesting, of course, that I have taken life. It matters little at the moment whether I admit it or not—your beautiful legal system would not even accept my confession—it would require me to prove the truth of my own assertion! But that is beside the point. I *will* admit that I have taken more than one life. I have lopped off from the parent tree certain useless branches just as a surgeon lops a gangrenous limb from a human body."

"You are not, I hope, going to pose as a benefactor of the human race?" asked the professor, with some disappointment.

"Certainly not. At the present moment my energies are devoted to benefiting one person, and that is myself."

"You are frank, at least."

"Of course I am frank; why else should I be here? But I merely wished, in justice to myself, to explain that I do not take life, or anything else, at haphazard. Have I not proved that, by coming here to try and preserve yours?"

"Well, I confess that you baffle me," Wells declared.

"I take that as a compliment," said Marle.

"What, then, is your purpose—for I suppose you have some purpose in life?"

"Oh, I have my little ambitions," the bookseller admitted, with a certain complacency. "But this is not the time to speak of them. Now, my dear sir, I do not want to become wearisome. I have given you some idea of my views. They may commend themselves to you, or they may not. I should naturally be glad to feel that we looked through the same spectacles, but I am afraid it is too much to hope. But although we may not be what I will call intellectual friends, why should we be enemies? If a brother scientist disagrees with the result of your researches, you may tell him he is wrong, but you do not set fire to his laboratory."

"Nor do I try to murder him," said the professor pointedly.

"But you would defend yourself if he tried to murder *you*," the bookseller retorted. "That is exactly my position. If you will allow me to go my own way, so much the better. But if you persist in trying to interfere in my affairs, I warn you that I will put a stop to your meddling, once and for all. I am sorry to have to speak so plainly, but I want you to realize the gravity of your position. I have told you before, and I say again, that I have the greatest admiration for your achievements, and I should deeply regret your loss to science; but I have no intention of letting you upset my plans. Be advised by me: you are not a policeman—leave the policemen's work to those who are paid to do it."

Wells thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"Mr. Marle," he said deliberately, "I am obliged to you for your warning—a warning that most people in your position would certainly not have given. I am obliged to you, also, for allowing me to gather some idea, if I may say so, of one of the strangest personalities I have ever met. Honestly, I don't think I quite understand you even yet, but at least my feet are on the right path."

"Then you accept my proposal?" cried the bookseller, rising eagerly.

The professor smiled.

"On the contrary," he answered cheerfully, "I am more than ever determined to put a pair of honest steel handcuffs round your wrists."

Mr. Marle showed no sign of anger; his voice was calm and almost gentle as he replied; but in the steady gaze of his keen eyes there lay a cold, relentless purpose that jarred unpleasantly even on the strong nerves of the scientist.

"Very well," said Marle. "I have done my best to persuade you to be reasonable but I must admit I hardly expected to be successful. It is odd how even the most logical brain can be swayed by sentimental considerations. However, sentiment is a costly emotion, as I am afraid you will have to learn. I must thank you for listening so patiently to my views—"

"Not at all," the professor interrupted. "They are most interesting. But before you go, would you allow me to ask you a question? It is a matter affecting neither your interests nor my own, I think, so much as those of another person."

"You refer to my ward, Pamela Fayne?" said Marle quickly.

"Yes."

"Then I know what you would ask. Pamela Fayne is in no way connected with any of my proceedings—except the matter of buying and selling books, in which she takes a great interest. Would it seem ridiculous if I used the conventional phrase and said that I give you my word of honor that she knows nothing whatever of the things you and I have just been discussing?"

"Not at all," Wells assured him, with grave courtesy.

Mr. Marle bowed and took a step toward the door. Then he turned suddenly and looked straight into the scientist's eyes.

"Professor Wells," he said slowly, "I am going to kill you. And yet, if you would allow me, I should like to shake your hand."

For a moment they stood thus; then their hands met and clasped firmly.

A moment later Wells found himself alone. Crossing to the window, he watched Gregory Marle walk down the street, tapping the pavement with his ebony stick. The bookseller disappeared round the corner, and Wells, throwing himself into his chair, refilled his pipe.

CHAPTER XII

INSPECTOR SIMS had not been idle; idleness was a crime which could rarely be laid to his charge. Indeed, Sir Charles Merivale, his chief, used to complain that nothing short of a stern order would compel Sims to take even those short holidays without which the strongest man cannot keep a sound mind in a sound body.

The Yard had been particularly busy, and Sims had been forced to give most of his attention to certain international inquiries in which the French authorities had requested the cooperation of the English police.

But on the morning of the day on which Mr. Gregory Marle so coolly discussed with Professor Wells the possibility of the latter's untimely death, Inspector Sims found himself free to return to the consideration of matters which interested him deeply.

After an early breakfast he sat in his little room at New Scotland Yard with a bundle of reports before him. At first sight they appeared to have little or no connection with the mystery of The Smiling Death, for they concerned the theft of a number of valuable pearls.

Before Professor Wells had suggested to him a solution of the cross-word puzzle found in Garcia's pocket, he had casually mentioned that a pearl theft had been reported to the police. But such thefts are common enough, and in his interest in the scientist's discovery he had forgotten the matter. It was not until afterward that the possibility of the stolen pearls being those referred to in the cypher message had occurred to him. Even now, although certain new facts had come to light, he had no definite reason to connect the two affairs, but he had decided that it was a line of inquiry worth following up.

As he studied the papers before him the buzzer of his desk-telephone sounded, and he lifted the receiver to his ear.

"All right; I'm expecting him. Send him up," he said, and a few moments later Roger Kent entered the room.

"Good morning," said the detective.

"Morning," replied Roger, shaking the proffered hand.

"I hope you didn't mind my turning you out at this hour," Sims went on.

"Not a bit," Roger assured him.

"Are you free for the next hour or so?"

"All day, if you like."

"Splendid. Sit down and smoke, will you?"

THEY seated themselves, and Sims tapped thoughtfully on his desk with the end of his pencil for a minute or two. Then he threw it down, leaned back in his chair, and looked at his visitor.

"Look here, Kent," he said frankly, "the fact is, I want to have a straight talk with you."

"Been finding out my past?" asked Roger, grinning.

"No; it's somebody else's past, and present, I want to talk about," Sims replied, and something in his manner made Roger grow grave.

"When you took on the thankless job of helping us," Sims continued, "we made it clear that we relied on you to keep under your own hat whatever you might see or hear."

Roger nodded.

"Well, I've asked you to come here by yourself because what I'm going to tell you will probably give you a bit of a shock. Don't think I doubt your loyalty, or even your discretion: what I'm going to say will be the best proof of that."

Again Roger nodded silently.

"We may be quite wrong, of course," the detective went on, "but we have certain reasons for believing that the man behind Garcia's death—the man behind the whole mystery of The Smiling Death, in fact—is Gregory Marle, the bookseller."

Despite the self-control on which he prided himself, Roger could not repress a sharp exclamation.

"Sounds absurd, doesn't it?" Sims agreed. "But listen—" and he proceeded to give the young man an outline of the conclusions at which he and the professor had arrived.

Roger listened in silence, his jaw set firmly.

"Pretty ghastly business," he said, when Sims had finished.

"Perhaps you'd rather drop it," the detective suggested, watching him closely.

"I don't drop things because they're unpleasant," Roger answered.

"I hoped you'd say that," said Sims heartily. "Now, will you think me offensive if I refer to a very personal matter?"

Roger looked quickly at him.

"You're not the sort of man who makes himself offensive for the fun of the thing," he answered dryly.

"Thanks. As a matter of fact, I don't. But in my job we sometimes have to poke our noses into what other people consider their private affairs. Do you see at all what I'm getting at?"

Roger colored, but he met the detective's gaze steadily.

"I think so," he replied. "You mean Miss Fayne?"

"Exactly," said Sims. "Now, to put it plainly, I don't know what your intentions may be regarding that lady—"

"I'm going to marry her," interrupted

Roger; and sat in secret amazement at his own words.

"Good luck to you," answered Sims.

"If she'll have me, that is," Roger added hastily.

"I hope she will," said the detective. "But you must see, now, why I offered you—and still offer you—the chance of washing your hands of our side of the affair."

Roger reflected.

"I don't believe Miss Fayne has anything to do with Marle's crimes—that is, if he *is* a criminal," he declared. "Do you?"

Sims pursed up his lips.

"If I did my duty," he said slowly, "I should reply that it is my business to keep an open mind. Miss Fayne is the ward of a man whom I believe to be a criminal, and I ought to regard her as a possible, if not probable, accomplice. But I don't mind telling you," he added, smiling, "that both Wells and I are inclined to think that she knows nothing whatever of her guardian's secret proceedings."

Roger's hand shook a little as he struck a match.

"I'm glad of that," he said simply.

"I'M NOT saying it simply to please you," Sims went on. "That is our honest belief, founded on certain reasons which we can discuss at another time. The point I want to put to you is this: if you care to stand in with us still, I think you may be very useful. It sounds as though I were asking you to use your acquaintance with Miss Fayne to become a sort of spy. In a way, that is true. But it is only by getting at the truth that we can find out whether Marle is guilty or not. If he is guilty, and if Miss Fayne is innocent—you see I am putting it quite plainly—then the sooner she is removed from his care the better."

"Don't you think she ought to leave him at once?" Roger demanded.

"Certainly not," replied Sims decidedly. "That would be a fatal mistake. And consider the difficulties. I don't know how far you are in her confidence—"

"Not at all, I'm afraid," Roger admitted. "But I think she likes me," he added, coloring.

"Quite so," said Sims, with careful gravity. "But you are hardly in a position to insist on her leaving a man who has looked after her for years."

Roger assented gloomily.

"What possible reason could you give?" Sims went on. "None at all, as a matter of fact—none that you could prove, I mean. You would simply put him on his guard, annoy Miss Fayne, and probably ruin your own prospects of marrying her. That's the long and the short of it."

"You're right, of course," said Roger, after a pause. "It's a beastly position."

"It is; but that's no reason why we should despair about it. If it's any comfort to you, I've seen a score of cases in which perfectly innocent people were mixed up with rogues, and I'm glad to say I've more than once been able to straighten things out for them. If I may say so, I like the look of Miss Fayne—"

"You've seen her?"

"I managed to catch a glimpse of her," said the detective in his dry way, "and you may be sure that she shall have a square deal. I think you must see that the best thing you can do is to help us to get at the truth—for her own sake as well as ours."

"You're right," said Roger; "I'll do my best."

"Good enough," said Sims, who knew when to leave well alone. "Now we'll get on to another matter. I'll just send for Andrews."

A brief order by telephone was followed by the appearance of Detective-sergeant Andrews, who greeted Roger politely and accepted the inspector's invitation to sit down.

"Andrews," said Sims, "just tell Captain Kent what we know about the Baumberg robbery."

The detective-sergeant made a show of referring to his note-book, but it was evident that he was too much interested in the case to need such reference. It appeared that a Mr. Morris Baumberg, a dealer in many precious objects, had reported to the police the theft of a string of valuable pearls. The strange thing was that Mr. Baumberg, while willing to pay any reasonable sum for the recovery of the pearls, was astonishingly anxious that there should be no public prosecution of the thief—a condition which the police, of course, could not accept.

"In ordinary circumstances we should refuse to act in such a case," Sims explained.

"Sounds fishy," Roger commented.

"It sounds fishy, as you say, sir," Andrews agreed; "but the funny thing is that Baumberg is not a crook. We know a good deal about him, and he's quite a decent sort. I was wondering, sir, whether you could find time to come and have a word with Baumberg. I feel all the time there's something up his sleeve, but what it is I'm hanged if I can discover."

Sims considered for a moment.

"I think I will," he decided.

Roger Kent rose.

"I'd better push off, then," he said. "I'd love to come with you," he added rather wistfully, "but of course that wouldn't do?"

"Why not?" asked Sims unexpectedly. "Baumberg will take you for one of our fellows who work the West End places. And if you're going to help us, you may as well see any fun that's going."

A TAXICAB was soon found, and the three men drove to Gamage's big store in Holborn. Sims paid the driver and led the way into the shop. They walked from department to department, and presently emerged by a different door from that by which they had entered.

"What the devil did we go in there for?" asked the mystified Roger.

"Taxi-driver," answered Sims carelessly. "He recognized me, and there's no need for him to know where we're going."

"You don't suppose—"

"I don't suppose anything in particular," said the detective patiently. "These taxi-men are a mine of information for us, and no doubt they're equally useful to other people. It's only just a matter of precaution, in case anybody asked him where he drove us."

Roger marveled at what seemed a ridiculous precaution, but held his tongue.

Sims turned into Hatton Garden, and from that famous bazaar of dealers in gems into a quiet side street. Here, in a quiet office, they found Mr. Morris Baumberg, a quiet little man in a quiet suit, whose only outward manifestations of Judaism were a somewhat prominent nose, a rather guttural voice and a partly repressed tendency to emphasize his conversation with the aid of his carefully kept hands.

Sims and his companions were admitted to Mr. Baumberg's comfortably furnished private room by a hook-nosed, elderly man whom Baumberg introduced as his brother-in-law and confidential clerk, Mr. Isadore Cohen. The latter silently acknowledged the introduction, swept a brief but very observant glance at the three visitors in turn, and withdrew to the outer office.

"Well, Mr. Baumberg," said Sims, "we've come to discuss the loss of your pearls."

"It is terrible!" said Mr. Baumberg, with what seemed to Roger to be great distress.

"From what you told Sergeant Andrews," the inspector went on, "I gather that the robbery was ingeniously simple."

"Simple?" cried the pearl dealer. "It was so simple that it was most horribly clever! *Nu!*" he went on, using the Yiddish exclamation in his agitation, "I will tell you: we had a customer, a Señor Garcia. He was, I think, a foreign gentleman. He bought often a pearl, a diamond, this or that, paying in cash. He was a good customer. Not that he spent very large sums, but he knew good stones, and paid without haggling. Perhaps you know of me, Mr. Sims; I am known in this trade—"

"Oh yes," Sims assured him, with his pleasant smile. "We know you, Mr. Baumberg, as one of the greatest experts in the trade—and, let me add, a scrupulously honorable man."

Mr. Baumberg bowed, much gratified, and laid firmly on his desk his rebellious hands.

"I thank you," he said. "I am, you would say, a foreigner myself, but I have been naturalized many years already and it is my pride to show the example of fair dealing to my English competitors."

"An example some of them might follow with advantage," Sims remarked.

"Of that I say nothing," shrugged Mr. Baumberg. "Well, this Señor Garcia, then, came often, and we knew him as one knows a person one does pleasant business with. Sometimes he would smoke a cigar with me, or with Cohen, when there was time, and tell us amusing stories of his travels. I say this, you understand, so that you will see that he was no stranger to us."

"Quite so," Sims agreed. "A man you trusted, in fact?"

"As far as one may trust anybody," said Mr. Baumberg cautiously, and Sims nodded with admirable gravity.

"WELL, I must not waste words," the dealer resumed. "It happened that the last time Garcia called I was out. He talked to Cohen, asking if we had a small ruby which could be mounted in a queer old ring he had picked up in an antique shop. Cohen, thinking no harm, opened the big safe that is built into the wall, and took out some trays of stones. They had begun to look at them when suddenly they hear a sort of coughing cry and a falling on the stairs outside. Senor Garcia runs to the door, opens it, and hurries out. In a minute Cohen hears him calling. He runs out to help him, and finds him bending over a man who is struggling on the floor.

" 'Quick!' says Garcia; 'the poor fellow's in a fit, and he'll roll down the stairs if he's not stopped.'

"Cohen runs to him and they control the man's limbs, which jerk about violently, and he foams at the mouth. Then Garcia says, 'Hold him, while I get some water, or he'll choke.' And Cohen holds the man, who is now getting weaker, while Garcia rushes into the office, and presently comes back with a glass of water. Then the man gets better, and Cohen asks him to come into the office and rest, but he says, 'No, thank you,' he is used to it and will be all right. Then Garcia says it is all right, he will see the man into a cab. So he takes the man's arm—and then Cohen notices that the man has lost his left hand—and they go down-stairs, and Cohen comes back to the office. Cohen puts the trays of stones back into the safe and locks it. Then I come in, and go to the safe. And I find that the pearls are gone!"

The little man stopped abruptly.

"I suppose," said the inspector, "that the whole thing only took a few minutes?"

"Oh yes; perhaps three or four minutes, Cohen says."

"And nobody could have come into the office without being seen by Cohen?"

"Nobody. They were on the landing between the stairs and the office door."

"You have no clerks besides Mr. Cohen?"

"No. I employ a shorthand-typist, but she comes from an agency, takes down letters, and goes away to type them."

"Mr. Cohen is, you said, your brother-in-law?" hinted the detective.

Mr. Baumberg stared; then he laughed suddenly.

"Ah, I see!" he exclaimed. "But you need not waste time in suspecting Isidore. We work together already twenty years, and he could rob me any day he wanted all that time."

"Well, it certainly seems as though Garcia had gone to the safe and taken the pearls when he fetched the glass of water," Sims remarked. "Had he ever seen the pearls, or heard that you had them?"

Mr. Baumberg hesitated.

"I am not sure," he answered. "The day I had them first I was examining them in my room when Garcia called. Cohen told him to walk straight in, and I did not see him until he was inside the door. I put the pearls in their case at once and closed it. I do not know whether he saw them. He did not speak of them."

SIMS rose, walked up and down the room, and then faced the little dealer.

"Mr. Baumberg," he said quietly, "have you told his Highness that the pearls are missing?"

The dealer's face grew gray, and his fingers worked as he stared at the inspector in amazement.

"I—I don't understand," he stammered.

"I think you understand very well," Sims declared. "His Highness the—"

But Mr. Baumberg was on his feet.

"Please, please, Mr. Sims," he implored. "I beg you will not speak names. I will tell you, and you will see that I have nothing to be ashamed of, although I keep the secret of another. Even Cohen does not know, and I cannot imagine how you—"

"Never mind about me," Sims broke in. "I don't want to give away your secrets, Mr. Baumberg. I only wanted to show you that it's no good asking the police to help you if you don't trust them."

"I know, I know," cried the little man distractedly. "But listen, and you shall see how hard it is for me to know what to do. I have many clients, as you know, and they are all over the world. For them I sometimes transact business of many kinds, for they say that I am discreet. Very well. Some time ago there comes to me a messenger from a great lady. She is in great anxiety. It is necessary for her to raise a large sum of money at once. And her husband, he must not know. What to do? She thinks of me, and sends a trusted person. For security, she offers me the pearls. I lend her the money. It is all right. But the pearls, you say? Ah, they are a gift to her from a distinguished person—a *very* distinguished person. She would not ask him for the money, because

—well, there are reasons. Besides, she will repay the money. She is not poor—she is of great wealth. But this money she needs secretly and at once. These pearls, they are famous pearls, they are known. And his Highness gave them to her because she has a passion for pearls. But it was not to be known that she had them. They were presently to be restrung in two or three coils, so that they might not be recognized as the famous—as what they had been called in a single string. And now—"

Mr. Baumberg threw restraint to the winds, and allowed his hands to express his despair.

"It is a distressing business," said Sims kindly. "We must try and get the pearls back. Otherwise, I take it, you stand to lose very heavily?"

"Lose?" Mr. Baumberg shuddered. "You think that I fear for my money? Ah, because I am a Jew you think that money is everything to me. It is true that they are very valuable, but I, too, Mr. Sims, I am not a poor man." The little man drew himself up with an unexpected dignity. "I would pay their value at once, though it is a great one. I would ruin myself, if need be, to keep my reputation as an honest man. But it is more than that: there is the scandal, if it should be known. . . . And the lady trusted me—me, Morris Baumberg! I have been trusted, and I have betrayed my trust."

He sank into his chair, this stout little man, and buried his face in his hands, and the three men looked at each other without any desire to smile.

Sims bent over the desk and laid his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Come, come, Mr. Baumberg," he said. "A battle is never lost until it is won. We'll have a shot at getting back those pearls for you."

Mr. Baumberg raised his head.

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "You see now why I feared to say all I knew? Although," he added naively, "if I had known the police were like you, I should not have been afraid."

Sims smiled.

"That's all right," he said. "We have no desire to betray your secrets."

"But," said Mr. Baumberg anxiously, "you will be quick? If Garcia should find out about the pearls—"

"You need have no fear of Garcia," said Sims gravely. "He is dead."

"Dead?" echoed the dealer amazed.

"He was murdered."

"*Nu!*" murmured the other softly. "Then the pearls—?"

"The pearls have disappeared," said Sims, "and I think I can assure you that at the moment nobody knows where they are. Now, I want to ask your friend Mr. Cohen one or two questions, please."

QUARTER of an hour later, as Sims and the other two were on their way back to Scotland Yard, Roger Kent put a question to the inspector.

"Do you mind telling me," he asked, "how you knew about this royalty business?"

Sims chuckled.

"I'm afraid that was a bit of a chance shot," he explained. "Of course, it was obvious that Baumberg had something up his sleeve. You saw how agitated he was, more so than was natural for a man as rich as he is. It was evident that the mere money loss would not have put him into such a state—especially as it is a question whether he could have been held responsible for the loss. And in any case, as we know now, the owner could not have gone into court about the affair. Then Baumberg was too reticent about the theft not to make one suspicious."

"But even then—"

"Well, when we were in his office I noticed a letter of some sort just sticking out from under his blotter. As he moved his hands about he moved the blotter a little, and on the letter I saw an embossed crest. I happened to know that crest. It belongs to a certain lady whose friendship with a very distinguished foreign personage has been the subject of discreet comment in inside circles. So I took a chance, and it came off."

"I see," said Roger thoughtfully.

In the following chapters Marle plots to put Professor Wells out of the game and Sims counterplots.

CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

*who combines lots of quiet humor
with lots of violent action
contributes a new Western Novelette*

Peacock STUFF

CHAPTER I

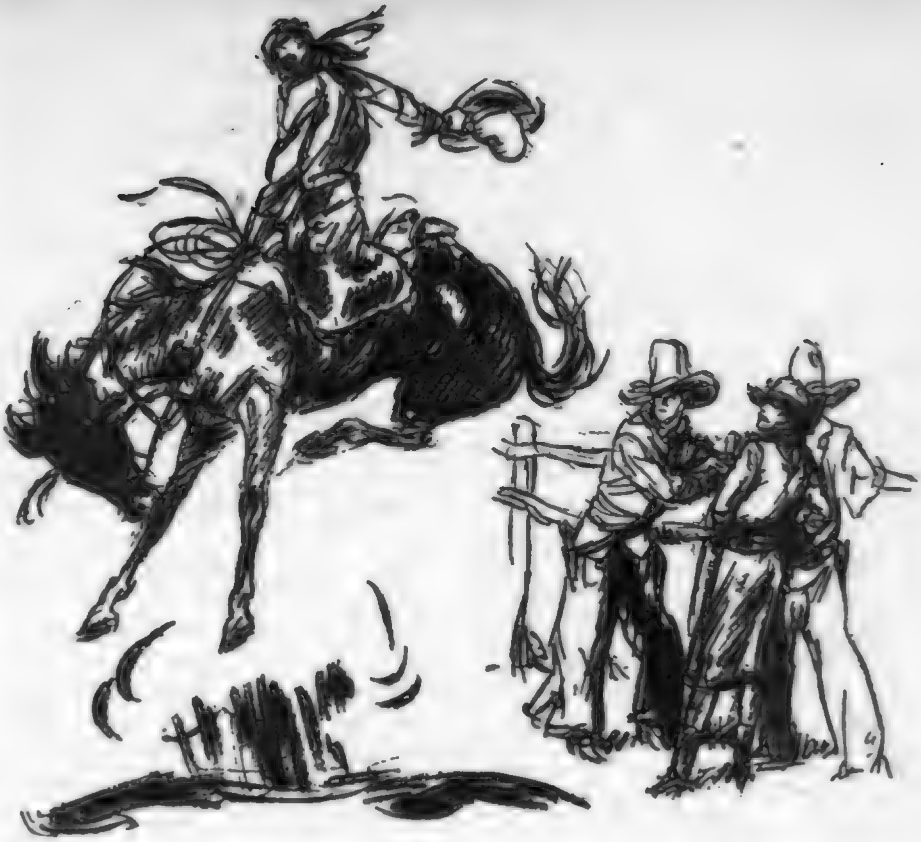
THE HUNTER

WHEN he came to the little waterfall which fell thinly down along the side of the high, rocky hill, Sheriff Sam White dismounted and gave his horse a modest drink before he lay on his own stomach and slowly swallowed what he allowed himself from the little pool at the bottom. The horse, released, went along the wall, seeking tufts of grass. The sheriff moved away from the pool and sat down with his back to the wall. He pulled his hat low over his forehead against the rising sun and sank into profound thought.

Horse and rider, despite a night of rest in the open, looked tired. They had the appearance of having traveled far. Dust was ground into the horse's coat. When he had rolled that morning before White had saddled him, he had rolled in sand. That had not improved his looks. Also he seemed not to have been fed any too plentifully of late. When he turned his head his ribs showed plainly, and there was a certain gauntness at the flanks.

White looked as if he himself might have rolled in dust. Dust was in his clothing and his boots were gray with it. He had rubbed his broad-brimmed hat with his elbow, but that had only smeared the dust over it. His face was clean, for he had camped beside water the night before, but his eyes had the red look which comes to eyes which have peered for long into clouds of sand. His hair seemed to have been dusted with a gray powder. Its corn color had been replaced by a dark gray.

In truth man and horse had traveled far. Setting out from the county seat twenty days before, White had ridden into every nook and corner of his county, save one. That one nook lay at his left now. This was a panhandle county, and the handle stretched down there for a dozen miles. These rocks made a high barrier between the handle and the pan itself, and White had left the traversing of them till the last. Travel over into that part of the county was rather infrequent. It was the wildest part of the county, the most primitive. Cattle could be brought out of there only by a long, hard drive, and the country was not thickly populated. There were a good many characters down there, too, who would not bear White's official scrutiny. However, that had not deterred him. He was seeking a man and he would have sought



him in hades if he could have gone there and if that had been necessary. His idea had been that the man he sought would not seek the wilder country. White gave him credit for some brains, and he did not think he would do the obvious thing.

But, if he were in this county, he was in all probability down there. White had ridden and ridden, all day long and parts of the nights, and he had found no trace of his man. He had had other men ride for him; he had telephoned; but all his work had yielded not the slightest clew. So he was now on his way to the panhandle.

HE WAS a young man, this White, elected by the people to take the place of a sheriff who had served for years but who had come to his time to quit. White had been a puncher before that, but he had stayed on one job for five years. It was known that he never took a drink, was in fact a man of the most regular and steady habits. The fact that he was a top hand had been in his favor. A top hand was the kind of man the people wanted for sheriff, one of themselves, only a little more clever ahorse or with a rope.

Some people said, after White took office, that he had a swelled head. He hadn't. At first he had been embarrassed to find himself in the limelight, and he hadn't known how to handle himself. Then he had begun to see that there was a good deal of responsibility on his shoulders. He became afraid of making mistakes, of falling down on his job. Being young, he grew a little taciturn. Folks noted a kind of aloofness in him. He had a habit of looking at people as if he thought he might some day have to arrest any one of them. However, in the main, he gave satisfaction and at the end of six months he had not fallen in the esteem of his constituents, taking them by and large.

This hunt he was on was self-imposed. He had received a circular describing the man who was wanted. The description, White knew, would have fitted any one of a hundred punchers. The man had dark brown hair and brown eyes. He was nearly six feet tall and he would weigh in the neighborhood of one hundred and seventy. He was wanted for robbery. Not much to go on, for a fact.

But White had been stirred the moment he read the circular. There was no especial reason for believing the man had come to these parts except that he had started north from California. He might be in Oregon, but as far as that went he might be in British Columbia or even in Alaska. And yet just supposing White could run him down? Just supposing! White had mulled that over for several hours and then he had put his deputy, Dover, in charge and had started out. He had a notion, this morning, that he would get only a good deal of criticism out of his adventure. He would have been gone for three weeks, tomorrow. Any number of people would have been asking for him, to consult him about the petty things that were constantly coming up. That these things were petty made no difference. They wanted to see White. Where in heck was White? He could see men who had ridden fifty or sixty miles glowering at Dover as Dover made his uneasy answers. Of course he had met many men in his travels, but when he had finished with them he had always said he reckoned he would hit it for home. He hadn't hit it for home. He had kept on going.

Now he looked toward his horse.

"Well, old-timer," he said aloud, "let's move. We have found the pan empty. Let's see what we can find by crawlin' along the handle."

He whistled the horse up to him, mounted and set off along the rocky, downward trail. The trail at first was not more than a dozen feet wide. On one side were the big, rocky hills and the other a sheer drop, a veritable cañon. Within a mile the hills' shoulders began to droop and the trail dropped steadily. Coming about a curve, White stopped his horse and looked beyond him. The trail wound abruptly to his right and below him it met a flat. This stretched far away. The division here between this and the adjoining counties was a mere imaginary line in the flats. This handle should properly have belonged to one of these adjoining counties, but by some freak of division it had remained in White's county.

WHITE knew few people here, for they did their business in the villages which could be reached over the flats. The rocky barrier was passed infrequently. One man he did know well. That was old Lassiter, who had a small ranch down here somewhere. Lassiter considered himself a rather important personage in spite of his small holdings, and when White had been up for election he had worked for White and had unnecessarily visited him a number of times while the fight was on.

Below him White could now see a group of buildings, the usual house, sheds, and corrals. That might be Lassiter's place and it might not. However, White knew that he could learn there where Lassiter lived. He sent his horse slowly down the slope. The slope at times was so steep that the horse was almost on his haunches.

As he rode toward the ranch he saw no one, and he dismounted in silence in the door yard. As he approached the door he heard snoring, and looking in, he saw a fat cook asleep with a towel over his face. He hailed the cook and the latter awoke without a start and dragged the towel away. His face was hot and sweaty.

"Yeah?" he said.

White watched him as he came fully awake. White had never seen him before, and he noticed that the eyes the man turned on him had no recognition in them.

"I'm lookin' for a man named Lassiter," White said.

"Lives right here," the cook said. "Out on his hawse some place now, though. Be back at noon, he said."

He rose heavily and waddled to the door. He looked at the horse.

"Traveled far, ain't you?" he asked. "Well, if you are a friend of Lassiter's you better turn that horse in and give him some hay and come in and get some food your own self."

"I'd rather rest for a while," White said.

"Suit yoreself," said the cook, and he went back to his chair and covered his face with the towel again.

White took care of his horse and then he went to a tree which stood above the well. After a longer drink than he had taken before, he lay down beneath the tree, his ear to the ground. Almost at once he was asleep.

He was awakened toward noon by the drumming of hoofs in the ear which was pressed to the ground. He awoke quietly, got to his feet, and went over to the corral. He leaned on the bars, so that he would be plainly visible to the oncoming horseman. He did not look like an officer as he stood there. He wore overalls and a blue shirt and his star was not in evidence. He had the appearance of a puncher who, very likely, was looking for a job. He had been at a good deal of pains to make himself appear so.

Presently a horse came into view on the flat. White straightened up and raised a hand and held it aloft. The rider caught sight of it and pulled down his horse. White walked out to meet him.

He kept his eyes on Lassiter's face, and the regard of Lassiter was equally steady. Neither man spoke till White was under Lassiter's horse. Then White said quietly:

"My name is Vernon. I'm lookin' for a job."

Lassiter blinked once or twice, and White let him take his time.

"All right, Vernon," Lassiter said at last. "Reckon I can use you. Folla me up to the house."

"Any of your boys know me?" White asked.

"Think not. Only one of my old boys here now. You know how they come and go in this God-forsaken nook. Hard to keep 'em. I got three new men."

White's eyes glowed.

"I'm interested in new men," he said.

"I'll have 'em all up here 's evenin'," said Lassiter.

CHAPTER II

THREE NEW MEN

RUNNING as small an outfit as he did, Lassiter had no bunkhouse. His men slept in the house. They ate in the kitchen the food which the aloof old cook slapped on the table.

Rested, White appeared at the table that night. He came in after the other men were seated. They, as well as Lassiter, greeted him in silence. A supper table was no place for talk till appetites had been satisfied. The cook served White and he kept his eyes on his plate.

"Vernon's his name," Lassiter said with a wave of his hand when the meal was done.

The men made little noises in their throats and nodded just perceptibly. Lassiter waited a moment as if there were no hurry, and then he named the men to White. As he did so, White let his eyes travel over the faces of the three newcomers. He had easily picked those three. They had a slightly different air from the man who had been with Lassiter longer. They were not so much at home. Also the older hand conducted himself toward Lassiter with more freedom. White had a feeling that the other three were still sizing up their new employer.

The man whom White was seeking could easily have been one of those three. That man had started north, and he might have stopped here. White tried to make his traveling glance casual, but it was almost more than he could do. He had ridden far on what could be a wild goose chase, and if it should end successfully here he would get a thrill out of it.

He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary about the three men. Any one of them might have answered the meager description he had. All of them, for one thing, had brown eyes. One of them had light-brown hair, the second dark brown. The third man had had his hair clipped close, and it seemed more gray than brown. He was a man of about thirty-five, and White knew that his hair might be brown when it was longer. He had seen dark hair show gray when it was clipped as if the grayness were working itself out from close to the roots. The three men, too, were about of a height. White, since they were seated, couldn't tell what that height was.

"Where you driftin' from, Vernon?" one of the men, Karney by name, asked.

While he had eaten, White had been thinking things over. Since he had been sheriff, he had discovered that a crook's anger was quickly aroused. In this case he had one more thing to go on. He decided to see how far the anger of these men lay below the surface. Lassiter, he knew, would back him up, for he had had a long talk with Lassiter before the men had come in.

"Oh," he said coldly, "I ain't no drifter. I been around this country for quite awhile now. I come here from the East. I worked over in Montana and then in Nevada. Where you from, fella?"

It was one thing to ask a man casually just to make talk, where he had drifted from; it was quite another thing to demand, in that cold tone, precisely where a man was from. However, Karney did not seem to care. No flush of anger came to his cheeks.

"Oh, me," he said lightly, "I been up and down, California, Oregon, Washington."

Karney was out of it, White confessed to himself. No hunted crook could have used that tone. The two other men said nothing for a moment, and White busied himself with a cigaret.

"Eddy and Karney been traveling together," Lassiter said.

White believed that somehow. He believed the two men were pals who wandered up and down the tier of coast states, having a good time with as little work thrown in as possible. That left the third man, him of the clipped head.

As he puffed out a mouthful of smoke, White looked at this man. He did not know whether to be disappointed or not. Certainly the man did not look like a crook. When his hair was longer, he would be a rather presentable person. His features were regular. His face had no dull, brutal expression. And his eyes were not exactly brown. In this light they seemed more to be gray.

LASSITER had named this man as Erler. Erler, as White looked at him, was sitting perfectly still. He had finished his cigaret and had tossed it into his cup. His hands were beneath the table, his shoulders were squared, and his head was slightly lifted, so that his eyes were on the wall behind Lassiter. He looked as if he had not heard what had been said, or if he had he was not interested in it.

White himself went still at that. Here was a sign. If a man had picked up as clear a sign as that on the trail, he would have had no difficulty in reading it. It had been White's experience that the chatter of punchers freshly met was always interesting to any man, with one exception. That exception was the man who carried an habitual grouch. A man with a grouch would listen and listen and move his lips only to sneer, no matter what was said.

But the sign to White was that this man did not have a grouch. His expression was pleasant enough, and it was keen, as if it had been sharpened by encounters in the past, by experiences out of the ordinary. White was sure of two things then: he was sure that this man was listening for him to say something further, and that he was trying to keep that look of keenness out of his face.

He was not succeeding in that latter. Indeed as White continued to look at him, the expression grew. It was so marked that it seemed to White the face actually grew thinner. Erler must have realized that, too, for he was touched by anger. The only sign of it was twin red spots which appeared in his cheeks.

White had to give him credit for fine self-control, though. Mastered apparently by his desire to look at White, whose eyes he must feel on his face, Erler turned and looked directly at him. White was surprised to find that the eyes were brown now. Erler's emotion seemed to have deepened their color. Yet when he spoke his voice was cool enough, and low.

"I been in the East myself," he said.

"If any state produces better hands than Nevada and Montana I ain't seen 'em," White observed.

He dropped his own cigaret into his cup and took up the cup and shook the little coffee that was in the bottom of it, the while he kept his eyes on it. He had had his fill of looking at Erler. He wanted to leave to his sense of hearing his next measurement of the man.

"Only two states produces real top hands," Erler said.

"Which is them?" White asked, his eyes still lidded.

"Texas and New Mexico, especially Texas. Hell, ropin' and ridin' and all such has got to be in a man's blood. It is in his blood if he hails from one of them states."

"You hailin' from Texas?" Karney asked, voicing the question which White had not dared to ask for himself.

"Originally, yes, when I was a kid."

"You got that stuff in your blood, eh?" Karney chuckled.

"You've seen me on a horse," Erler said coldly. "You've seen me with a rope in my hand."

"Oh, yes," said Karney quickly, and lapsed into silence.

Erler had been rolling a fresh cigaret. When he had finished rolling it, he wet it and put it into his mouth.

"I dunno whether it's true or not," White drawled, "but I've heard a Texas man just winds up a cigaret and holds it together till it burns down to his finger. Then he drags that finger away and lets her burn down to the next. I don't see you doin' it."

Erler smiled. It was a thin-lipped smile, and there was a touch of triumphant malice in it.

"I said I come from Texas when I was a kid," he stated, "I had a strict dad. He wouldn't let me smoke."

He put his cigaret into his mouth and puffed contentedly. The red spots were gone from his cheeks. He looked like a man who had put one over. White saw that it was not going to be easy to lead this man into a trap. He seemed to consider even his most trivial statements before he uttered them.

THERE was silence in the room for a moment. White knew that he must now decide what rôle he was going to play in the little drama. The rule of opposites came to his aid. He decided he would travel farthest if he became a foil for Erler. Erler was clever. Then he should be a vain dullard.

"I see," White nodded slowly. "Well, you was speakin' of ropin' and ridin' bein' in a man's blood. I've heard, too, that blood will tell. It certainly has told in my case."

"You can ride?" Erler asked quickly. "You can handle a rope?"

"Me?" White inquired. "Well, I expect there are a few better'n me."

This was not idle. White had a background for it, a background of his own making. He waited in some suspense for Erler's next remark. Erler smoked for a moment.

"Might be," was all he said at last.

White knew that he had for the moment failed. And yet there was something about this man which held his interest. He might not be the crook he was looking for, but if he were not what was he doing in this faraway nook of the cattle country? He spoke of states as a localized man might speak of counties. What events had washed him up here. White had to consider that. He decided he would try Erler out further, a little later. He had searched the county for his man. If Erler were not he, then very likely White had been on a wild goose chase. Wild goose chases didn't appeal to him.

CHAPTER III

GIRL WANTED

WHITE and Lassiter were in Lassiter's room that night, preparing for bed. Punchers who worked for Lassiter were a good deal crowded most of the time, but nobody had ever complained of that. Lassiter had said White would have to bunk with him. White had objected to that. He suggested that Erler might suspect that they were more friendly than White would have them appear.

"I had a boy bunkin' with me 'till day before yestaday," said Lassiter. "He left then. These new boys were here then. It would look queer if you didn't slip into that boy's place. I ain't makin' no mistakes about this thing, White. Fact is I am all excited about it. It breaks the monotony."

"I see," said White.

He saw more than the one fact. He saw that things were breaking well for him in small matters. Maybe they would break well in big. If he bunked with Lassiter, he and Lassiter could have quiet talks unobserved, and they could keep each other posted. There was only one thing which White was afraid of. Lassiter liked to feel his own importance. He had proved that when White was running for sheriff. To get himself in the limelight in this matter he might spill the beans. He voiced that frankly to Lassiter now, reminding him of his pre-election activities.

"You jest keep your shirt on," Lassiter said. "Well, o' course, you can take it off before you crawl into bed. But don't worry none about me, I mean. I can be as foxy as the next."

With which White had to be satisfied.

"Well," the sheriff said, as he tugged at a tight boot, "I haven't got nowhere with that fella Erler yet. I acted like a perfect damn' fool with him while we was all sittin' out by the well tonight. Gosh, I bragged till I was black in the face. You mind that blue roan horse I busted for Willard that time, Lassiter? Well, I told Erler all about that horse. I said that people—said that this was the horse that no man could ride, and I rode him! I didn't bust him, I said. I gentled him. I gentled a man killer."

"Well, it was a fact, wasn't it?" Lassiter asked. "What did Erler say?"

" 'Thasso?' "

"I kep' close to Erler all day today," Lassiter said. "I noticed he had drawed into hisself."

"Ask any questions about me?"

"Not a question."

"Not so good," said White.

He had got both boots off and he sat on the edge of the bed and wriggled his toes. He cupped his chin in his hands and stared down at the bare floor. Lassiter let him go, proving that he had more self-restraint than White had thought he had.

"What I was aimin' at was to get Erler

to brag about his own ridin'," the sheriff stated after a while. "But he wouldn't fall for it."

"I don't see where that would have got you," Lassiter said.

"Tell you about that when we get all through. It ain't important just now. The important thing just now is to stir Erler up to show himself. That's what I got to do."

LASSITER, sitting in a chair across from the bed, assumed White's attitude. He cupped his chin and he frowned and bit at his mustache. He gave a fair imitation of a man trying to think, but his thinking didn't seem to get him anywhere.

Suddenly White chuckled. Lassiter looked up and became his natural self. He waited patiently for White to speak.

"Lassiter, if a man can't get another man to do a certain thing, who could?" White asked.

"You're smart, White," Lassiter said. "If you can't pull this thing off, I dunno if anybody could do it."

"Thanks," White said dryly. "Let the compliment ride, far as men go."

Lassiter's old eyes brightened. He had taken that one right off the bat, and he was delighted with himself.

"If a man couldn't do it," he cried, "a woman might. That the idea?"

"I would send you to the head of the class, if there was a class," White said. "That's the idea exactly. This here fella Erler is as vain as I have made myself out to be. That is what I have been tryin' to drag up in him, his vanity. I have put my own vanity on show, but I don't seem to get to his. We need a bright young girl to help us. Is there one anywhere in this here handle?"

"White," Lassiter said, "you are a lucky guy. Here a bit ago you was on'y a puncher, and now you are the sheriff of this county, esteemed and admired. I don't say you don't deserve it, but, hell, a man gets what he deserves only about once out of a million times. Now, you are lucky again. I know just exactly the kind of girl you want."

"Where is she?" White asked, rising.

"Set down and rest your feet some more," Lassiter advised. "I ain't said I would agree to get this girl. White, she is a nice girl. Gosh, if I had ever been married and had had a daughter, this girl is the kind of daughter I would of picked for myself. She and her brother bought the Stratton place over here last spring. They are kinda hard up and I been lending them a hand. I been ridin' over there considerable off and on. Me and that girl is great friends. She would do anything for me.

"But you looka here, White. This here girl is a lady. She ain't to be dragged into nothin' that is goin' to cause the least little bit of nothin', no ondue excitement, no worry, no bein' pestered by any damn' puncher or nothin' like that. That is a law I am passin' this minute, and I will enforce it."

"Why, you know me, Lassiter," the sheriff said gravely. "I reckon if you feel like a father to her I could feel like a brother. I ain't no slick-haired villain, am I?"

"Certainly not! But you are sheriff and you are on a manhunt. That combination might make you forget other folks. In your eagerness to nab this fella Erler, if he is your man, you might forget about the girl."

"I won't forget about her, Lassiter," White promised.

Lassiter sat looking at him for a moment, his eyes half closed. Then he nodded with a sudden brightening of his face.

"I see," he said. "You run deeper than folks think, White. You are a good man. I can pick 'em. I seen that in you when you was runnin' for sheriff, but lately—"

"I know," White nodded. "People said I had a swelled head."

"It's a lie," said Lassiter without any particular heat. A sudden thought came to him: "Say, White, if you think Erler is your man, whyn't you just drag him down to where he is wanted and show him to the sheriff there."

"I can't," White answered simply. "First place, I don't think I would have a legal right. Second place, I wouldn't attach suspicion to a man unless I had more to go on than I have in this case."

"I'll get that girl for you," said Lassiter, and there was more in his tone than in his words.

"When?"

Lassiter pulled out his big silver watch.

"On'y nine fifteen," he said. "Drag on your boots again."

This ready decision to act was no surprise to White. Whatever else a man might be or do, he was always supposed to be ready to act promptly in an emergency.

IN A short time they were mounted and riding in the road. They rode for a mile and then Lassiter headed across the flat, White following him. Two miles more brought them out on a winding road. This led them up into the shadow of the hills over which White had crossed the day before. Below these hills there was a meager ranch outfit, a small house, a corral, and two sheds, open in front. Three horses came up to the corral bars and pressed their chests against them.

At first White thought there was no one awake in the house, but as he and Lassiter stopped, he saw that a light was burning in the kitchen. The blind was drawn, however, and this kept the light from flowing into the night.

"That girl is a worker," Lassiter said. "Nicest little housekeeper ever you saw. This place ain't much on the outside, but the house is clean as a whistle inside."

He went up to the door and knocked on it. White stood back. The door was opened without hesitation, and a girl stood fully revealed with the light at her back. Sheriff Sam White took a quick, sharp breath.

It was not that she was a pretty girl, especially. Comely, White thought her. She had that wholesomeness. There were a few girls in the village whom he would not have applied that word to. Lips too red, eyes too bright. This girl's lips were red, but it was the color of health; and that color ran in her smooth cheeks, too. Her eyes were bright but it was a kind of subdued brightness, the light, the sheriff thought, for some inner, beautiful thing.

She wasn't so slender as those village girls, either. There was a suggestion of round suppleness in her. She was a strong girl, White thought. So far as strength went she would be just the girl to play the part in the comedy which White wished to stage. At least he supposed it would be a comedy.

As she stood looking down at Lassiter in the few seconds it took her to recognize him in the half light in which he stood, she put up a hand and pushed back her hair. It was bobbed hair, a sort of reddish brown; but the bob was not what White had heard called a boyish bob. The hair was inclined to curl; and it had a sheen. Soft and fine, that hair. Fine the girl, too, but not soft. Looked very capable.

"Why, Mr. Lassiter," said the girl with quick brightness, "come in."

She stepped back from the door, still holding the latch of it, and Lassiter turned to White.

"Go right in, Mr.—er—Vernon," he said.

WHITE passed him and entered the door. He had to step within six inches of the girl as he did so. Her brown eyes looked steadily into his gray ones. Lassiter followed, and the girl closed the door.

"White is my name, ma'am," said White. "I am the sheriff of this county. Traveling under the name of Vernon temporarily. On business, you know."

The girl was not in the least startled by learning that she was receiving a night visit from the sheriff. Her eyes remained as cool and steady as they had been all along. There was, White perceived, nothing to conceal in this house. The coolness, the calmness, of a hard-working honesty was here.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked.

They took chairs and she sank into one beyond them.

"Ma'am," said Lassiter, "we have to ask—"

"Ma'am," White broke in, "we was just ridin' by and I suggested that we stop for a minute. We saw a light. I thought the horses might rest and we might get a drink of water."

"First lie ever I heard Sam White tell, ma'am," said Lassiter. "We didn't see no light. Fact is, we thought you and your brother was abed till we was right out there by the window. The shade is drawed, you know."

Sam White flushed. He saw the faint trembling of a little smile at the corner of the girl's mouth. He had decided that he would not use this girl for the purpose he had in mind, or for any purpose. She was a girl to be guarded. Which was a fair beginning for a man like Sam White.

"There was something you wanted me to do?" the girl asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Lassiter began, but again White interrupted him.

"There was, ma'am," the sheriff said,

"but there isn't now. It ain't necessary. I have thought of something else."

"Thinkin' of somethin' else is not so good," Lassiter declared. "He had an inspiration, ma'am, and a man don't often get them. It come to him just after he had dragged off his boots. I've often noticed that a man will begin to think more clear when he gets his boots off after a hard day. I—"

"You will oblige me, Lassiter, by not telling Miss—Miss—"

"My good gosh," Lassiter exclaimed, "I am almost but not quite forgettin' my manners. Miss Merrill, this here is Sam White, our sheriff. He told you that, but I am makin' it official. Mr. White is trailin' a crook, ma'am. That crook is now workin' for me. I—"

"Only a suspect, ma'am," White stopped Lassiter, "and not much of a suspect at that. Mr. Lassiter is bent on telling you all about it, so I had better do it. I would want it to be told straight."

He fixed a withering glance on Lassiter, but old Lassiter only beamed. One would have said that that was what he had been angling for. White told his story, told how he had received the circular, how he had searched the county, and how the man who called himself Erler was the first man he had come upon who might be the man he sought.

"And what was it you wanted me to do?" Miss Merrill asked.

She was looking straight at White. He wanted to burn Lassiter up with a look this time, but he did not dare to do it under her eyes.

"Nothing, ma'am," he said gently. "It ain't a job for you.

"I wouldn't be afraid," she said softly.

"Ho, ho," old Lassiter laughed, and he smote his thigh mightily. "Ain't that just what I been sayin' to myself all the way over here? Why, White, the hand of Providence is in it. Why, Laura fits into this thing like her slim little foot would fit into a new white-kid slipper. You go on and tell her."

Doggone that man Lassiter! Didn't he have no delicate feelin's a-tall? Idea of him mentioning Miss Merrill's slim little foot. Sam White blushed, but only a little laugh—silvery laugh—came from the girl. Well, old Lassiter couldn't embarrass her none, and that helped a little.

SAM WHITE made up his mind, and that was one definite thing about Sam White. When he made up his mind, he made it up completely and tightly and hog-tied it so that there was no danger of the knot slipping. He rose.

"Ma'am," he said, "Mr. Lassiter tells me that you and your brother are newcomers here. It's kind of a hard country, but I hope you will get along. I'm ridin' out this way every once in a while, and if at any time there is anything I can do for your brother—in—er—his work, I will be only too happy to do it. Come on, Mr. Lassiter, we will be gettin' back to your place."

"But—" Lassiter began.

Doubtless he surprised himself by his quick thinking. He stopped on the one word, rose obediently, and followed White to the door.

"Good night, ma'am," said White with a bow that was not so bad.

"Good night, ma'am," said Lassiter, and bobbed his bald old head.

"Good night," said Laura Merrill, and lowered her head and put her hand over her lips.

"You doggoned old rabbit, she was laughin' at us," White complained outside. "You made a fool of yourself and me, too."

"I didn't lie anyhow," Lassiter stoutly declared. "You said you was ridin' down here every such and so often and this is your first trip."

"I said I *might be* ridin' out here," White asserted.

"Oh, misquote yourself and see if it hurts my feelin's," said Lassiter. "Anyhow you mentioned a drink of water for you and me, and we didn't get it. How about you?"

"I don't want a drink," White rejoined, "and you don't need one. Come on."

"When I get the drink."

He returned to the door, rapped, and was admitted by the girl again. White saw him close the door carefully. He was inside long enough to have drunk a barrel of water.

"I s'pose you babbled your head off," White said angrily.

"I chatted," said Lassiter. "Think I was goin' to make a call and not find out how matters was goin' with her and her brother? *I* got manners, White."

"Of a jackass," White said.

"Still, manners."

They started to return by the way they had come. A mile out in the flat they came to a bunch of juniper trees beside a creek which they had been riding parallel to. White was a little in advance of Lassiter. Lassiter suddenly stopped his horse. He was on the ground by the time White turned his head.

"Horse has picked up a stone," Lassiter said.

"Want me to hold a match for you?"

"Nope. Can see in the dark."

He leisurely took out a big jackknife, lifted the horse's off front foot, and began to pick at it with the blade. White paid no attention to him. His thoughts were on that girl back there. By golly, she was a nice girl. She was just the right kind of girl. S'posin' a man was married to a girl like that? What a fine little pal she would make for a man! Gosh, a man would have some place to go to when he got through with his day's work. White could hear that little laugh come from her lips again. He could see that shine in her eyes. Well, he certainly would be ridin' over this way again. It wouldn't be on official business either. For fifteen minutes Sam White was anywhere but under the juniper trees.

At the end of that time he came to himself. Lassiter was still picking away at his horse's hoof.

"Say, is this an all night job?" White asked.

Lassiter dropped the foot and straightened up. White could hear him chuckle. Also White's ears caught a sound; doubtless it was the sound which had moved old Lassiter to mirth.

And then Laura Merrill came riding round the juniper trees.

CHAPTER IV

"FOR MR. LASSITER"

AT FIRST White felt as if he must explode. He could feel the steam of his anger boiling up in him. Doggone old Lassiter! He had gone back into the house and had arranged that Laura should follow them. He had double crossed White! However, it was difficult, at this stage of the game, for White to forget that he was sheriff. He must be as dignified as possible. So he spoke not to Lassiter but to Laura.

"Mr. Lassiter accused me of lying a while ago," he said. "When he went into the house he said he was going to get a drink of water."

"Which I done," said Lassiter. "I drunk two cupfuls, and I can prove it by Miss Merrill."

"You did something else," White said.

"O' course I did. I neglected to tell you. I'd have give you a printed program of everything I was goin' to do, only the programs wasn't off'n the press at that hour. I'd suggest we ride."

White rode but only far enough to bring him to Laura's side.

"Miss Merrill," he said, "I have to beg your pardon. Lassiter and I shouldn't have come over here. You see, I haven't had much experience with girls, and it never occurred to me what a low-down trick it would be to ask you to help in this little matter. Let me take you back home. I can very well handle Erler by myself."

"I can't see that it is a low-down trick," the girl returned. "In fact I welcome the chance for some fun. It gets pretty monotonous over there in the shadow of those hills all the time. I am alone a good deal. My brother has only one man working for him, and they are busy night and day. I want to go on."

"But I can't ask you to do this thing for me," White said.

"Oh," she smiled, "I am doing it for Mr. Lassiter. You see, he has been very kind to us since we have been here. He comes over every once in a while, and his help and his advice have been very valuable to my brother."

"Uh huh," said White.

It was not a very elegant thing to say, but the worthy sheriff felt as if he had been handed a punch on the jaw. She was doing it for Lassiter, eh? That old rabbit!

"You refuse to return home?" White asked.

"Oh, do you have to put it that way? Can't you ask me to go along with you, now that I have come this far?"

"Why, I really can't," he said seriously. "If this man Erler is what I suspect him to be, he is a dangerous man. There may be some rough stuff pulled off over here on Lassiter's place. You certainly shouldn't be in it."

"Well, you were going to have *some* girl in it," she said.

"I wasn't going to have *you* in it," he retorted.

"I think you would have to go over in the next county to get the girl you want," she said. "Don't you think this county is big enough to handle this matter?"

"Ma'am," said White suddenly, "there is no arguin' with you. You are too much for me."

She looked at him narrowly, and White told himself that she was as smart as a whip. She had guessed that he had made this sudden decision, indicating as it did his yielding, only after he had decided on what he was going to do.

"Then you consent to my going?" she asked.

"No! But you're goin' anyhow."

"I am," she laughed, "so there is no reason why we should waste further time here. Ready, Mr. Lassiter?"

They rode on toward Lassiter's.

It was true that White had another plan in his mind. He had got Laura into this thing. He would see that she was not even embarrassed by anything that might follow. Any danger to her he would keep miles away from her. To do that he would have to watch her closely. That would interfere with his development of his theory about Erler, but it would just have to interfere. The West demanded that a man guard a woman—

WHITE stopped that line of thinking. Of course the West demanded that, but it didn't cover his case. As a sheriff and as a man he would guard any woman, whether she was young and brown-haired or feeble and old and gray, whether she was pretty or—well, not so pretty. But that didn't account for the special pleasure he would have in looking after Laura Merrill. He knew already that he liked to be with her. Even now he had a kind of a cheery feeling even though she had refused to do what he had asked her to do.

Sheriff White had never heard of Othello. A moving picture had been his dramatic limit. So he had no tales to tell when the calm young woman asked him about his work. He said that it was just a matter of routine, civil cases mostly.

"Mr. Lassiter has told me about some of the things you have done," she smiled. "He said you—"

"Old Lassiter? Why that old man makes up tales to tell people. If he has been telling you things about me, they probably aren't true, ma'am. He just uses me because I am the sheriff. He would use any other sheriff that had my job."

"Aren't you rather young to be sheriff?" she asked.

"Me. Why, ma'am, I'll be thirty before long."

"So very old," she said.

Well, doggone! She wasn't the nice, quiet girl he had thought her after all. Well, yes, of course she was nice, but she wasn't so quiet. For Sheriff White, for all his being wrapped up in his job and being rather dignified about it, knew when he was being made fun of. He convinced himself that he was being made fun of now by turning in his saddle and looking at Laura. Sure! She was smiling, a knowing, provoking little smile.

Sheriff White decided that he would snatch up his cloak of dignity and wind it round and round him. She would see that he was a sheriff every inch of him, so far as demeanor went. And yet— Well, twenty-nine isn't old for a man. And that girl's smile was infectious. White had a notion that if he smiled, she would laugh again, and he liked her laugh. So he smiled, and when he smiled, he was a pretty good-looking kind of fella, showing white teeth and bright eyes and all that. Sure enough, Laura laughed. She leaned over a little in the saddle—away from White as it happened—and there was that silvery sound in the silence of the night. Well, the sheriff was as far removed from poetry as a man might be, but he was conscious of a kind of singing inside of himself. No matter what the outcome of this adventure might be, he would certainly have to pay a little more attention to the folks in the panhandle. He had kinda neglected that part of his bailiwick. Doggoned if he didn't feel more cheerful than he had felt in a long time.

BUT of course old Lassiter had to spoil it all. The old rabbit had to turn in his saddle and look back and grin like a chessycat.

"You two young folks seem to be gettin' along fine together," he observed. "Don't blame you none. You certainly make a fine-lookin' couple together."

Sheriff White believed in that moment that he could cheerfully have pulled his gun and as cheerfully have put a bullet into old Lassiter. The roughneck! He had said the commonest thing a man could think of to say. What would Miss Merrill think? White had withdrawn his eyes from her, and he did not dare look at her. She must be blushing furiously. She must be embarrassed to the limit.

"Don't we, though?" said Miss Merrill.

Sheriff White jumped. The jump was communicated to his horse. That worthy beast hopped forward till he was alongside Lassiter's animal. White, taking opportunity by the forelock, leaned down to the old man.

"Keep your mouth shut," the sheriff ordered.

"Why, man, I'm makin' a hit for you," Lassiter whispered innocently.

"Why men like you are allowed to keep on livin' I dunno," White whispered back savagely.

Then he held in his horse till Laura caught up with him.

"You like spirited horses, do you, Mr. White?" she asked.

"I like 'em to have a little life," he answered.

"So do I," she said. "I've ridden all kinds. I'm going to get a couple of good ones later on."

"You come from the East, ma'am," he said.

"Yes, Wyoming."

Well, now, this girl certainly was different from minute to minute, White decided. She had been quite gay a few minutes ago, but now she launched into stories of her life back in Wyoming. White listened raptly. He was not aware that they had reached Lassiter's place till Lassiter turned into the yard.

"Soft and easy," the old man said. "We don't want to rouse none of them boys."

White looked at the girl. He had expected to see, at last, a look of distaste in her face. There was none. Rather, she was staring at the house with sparkling eyes, as if she expected some one might issue from it and an adventure might at once begin.

There was no sign of life in the old house, however, and they put their horses in the corral and came to the kitchen door.

"NOW," said old Lassiter, "we better plan our campaign. Y' know, the best generals plans their campaigns right down to the last detail. In the mornin' we will all be at breakfast, Miss Laura. In you come. White, you keep your eyes on your man. Watch him like a hawk! See if his interest is aroused. Then we will decide what to do."

"We will do nothing of the kind," White said. "I—"

"I think it's an excellent plan," said Miss Merrill. "We will carry it out that far anyhow."

"Very well," said White, for there didn't seem to be anything else for him to say.

"I will go in and arrange a room for you, Laura," Lassiter said. "You and White just wait here."

That was just like the old fool. Sheriff White wanted to be alone with Laura, and yet he was scared to death to be alone with her. He didn't know what to say to her. What in heck did a man say to a girl like her when he was alone with her in the night, with a soft breeze in the trees over there by the well, and everything so quiet and serene? Sheriff White didn't know.

When Lassiter had gone, the girl sank down on the doorstep.

"Sit down, Mr. White," she said in a businesslike tone.

White sat down. The girl said nothing. She just sat with her chin in her hand and looked out across the vague flat. White thought it would be a good idea to hold his tongue, so he held it. Lassiter returned, as important as the proverbial hen with one chick.

"Now, you bid Mr. White good night and come with me," he said.

"Good night, Mr. White," said Laura.

"Good night," said White, and he was surprised that his voice was not so bass as usual.

Lassiter took the girl away. He came back in a few minutes.

"I will be sleepin' at the head of the stairs a little ways from her door," he announced. "You can lay down on the floor in the front room if you want to."

He disappeared quickly within doors. White smiled a little indulgently. Lassiter, he saw, had to dramatize everything that hapened to him. At that he was a pretty good old scout. White decided he would sleep under the trees. He got a blanket and stretched out there. At first he had a notion he would not sleep. He listened to the murmur of the breeze in the trees for perhaps thirty seconds. Then he went away from there. He dreamed of Laura, but

Laura always seemed to be laughing at him. In the cool of the morning he rose, deciding that he had been a good deal of a chump in his thoughts of the night before. It was a dignified and rather grouchy sheriff that walked rather stiffly toward the kitchen door as the sun was coming up over the high hills.

CHAPTER V

THREE TO THREE

BEFORE he reached the door, it was opened and the man who called himself Erler stepped through it. White immediately dropped his grouch. He recognized that he would have to continue to play his rôle, though it would be somewhat difficult.

"Mornin', Erler," he said, as cheerfully as he could.

Erler only gave him a surly nod and started to walk past him.

"Sunday is a dull day in this man's country," White said.

"Every day is a dull day," Erler said. "I never saw such a bunch of sod-busters in my time."

"Sod-busters," said White innocently. "Why, Lassiter has never turned a furrow in his life that I know anything about."

Erler stopped and fixed White with cold, hard eyes. White was surprised. He had been feeling kind of grouchy himself, but Erler was apparently suffering from more than a mere grouch. The man, White saw, was capable of violent passion. What he would be like if he had a real grievance White could only guess. Pretty bad, he supposed, since he could be like this for no real reason.

"Fella," Erler stated, "there are sod busters and sod busters. Some men is sod busters and know it; some is sod busters and don't know it. Get me?"

"I don't think I do, exactly."

"That is why you and Lassiter are the second kind of sod busters," Erler snarled.

"Me?" White laughed. "Gosh, I reckon any plow that I took hold of would turn the crookedest furrow the world has ever seen."

"Oh, hell," Erler exploded, and made as if to move on.

"One thing I can do and that is ride a horse," White stated. "I—"

"Are you goin' to start in on that again?" Erler asked. "I expect there ain't a horse in the world that can throw you."

"No horse has ever done it."

"What a liar you are!"

That was pretty stiff talk, but White, in his capacity of sheriff, had to take it for the time being. He managed a smile, though it was a bit twisted.

"Lassiter was tellin' me that he has a coupla broncs that can do a hop, skip, and jump with the best," White insinuated.

"Why don't you take 'em out and ride both of 'em at once," Erler snapped, as he definitely moved away.

"Mebbe I will," White called after him.

He went into the kitchen and found Lassiter there.

"Where are those two horses you were tellin' me about?" White asked.

"They was in a corral over by the hills," Lassiter answered. "They are there now if they haven't tore the roof off'n the corral."

"May need 'em after while," White said.

They sat and waited till the three other men came in. When the cook announced that the food was as ready as it would ever be, Lassiter went to the door and called Erler. Erler came in in silence and moodily took his place at the table.

"I think I'll be ridin' about tomorrow mornin', Lassiter," he said.

"Quittin' me?" Lassiter asked.

"You got this guy Vernon to take my place," Erler said. "He is the toppest top hand that ever forked a horse. Why keep me on?"

"I dunno if Vernon is goin' to stay," Lassiter said.

"Get somebody else then."

"Oh, I don't think you are quittin'," said Lassiter. "You got a Sunday-morning grouch."

"I'll take my money between now and mornin'," Erler declared.

Lassiter said no more, and they fell upon their food.

THEY had been eating for only a few minutes when the door from upstairs was opened, and Laura Merrill stood framed in the doorway. White's eyes had been on his plate. He took one swift look at Laura and then his glance shot to Erler. Erler had his coffee cup in his hand. He had been about to take a drink from it. He did not take the drink. He sat perfectly still, the cup raised. His eyes were fixed on the girl.

The change in him was fascinating to White. The harshness died out of his face. His eyes brightened. A smile came to his thin lips. He got to his feet with a swift grace.

White felt his whole body grow cold. This man Erler had had experience with women. He was undoubtedly clever with them. There was deference in his manner, as he withdrew his eyes from Laura and looked questioningly at Lassiter. Lassiter also rose. He introduced the men to Laura. The three men bobbed up from their chairs with murmured, "Glad to meetchas." Erler spoke Laura's last name distinctly, and he stood till she was seated beside Lassiter. White saw Lassiter look at Erler, whose eyes were still on the old cattleman's face, that question still in them.

"Miss Merrill lives over beyond here a ways," Lassiter said. "She was ridin' for home last night and got kinda scared to go on, it was so late. So she stopped in here."

"Miss Merrill don't look like a girl that would be easy scared," Erler stated.

"I was more tired than scared," Laura said coolly, and she met Erler's gaze fully.

Lassiter and White were satisfied to leave the situation in Erler's hands then, and the three other men could find nothing to say apparently. Erler began to talk eagerly. He talked a good deal, but he didn't say much. White, listening intently, decided that he was carefully avoiding mention of names and places.

"Have you ever been in Wyoming, Mr. Erler?" Laura asked, as he paused.

"One place I missed," he answered. "Heard a lot about that state, of course."

"My brother and I came from there," she said.

"Not goin' back?" he asked.

"Why, probably not."

"Wyoming will have to get along without me, then," Erler smiled.

Laura took that with a perfectly blank face, as if she did not grasp his implication. Erler's smile died. He seemed to be a little disappointed. White could have cheered if cheering had been in order. He believed he had never seen so clever a play. If Laura had taken up what Erler had said, he might have pursued that line of talk without arriving anywhere. As it was, he had to cast about for something else.

"Ride much, Miss Merrill?" he asked.

"Why, yes."

"I ain't seen much of this country. Mebbe we could get up a little party for this afternoon."

"Oh, I'll have to be going home. My brother will be looking for me. I left a note for him, but he doesn't like to have me away."

"Well, I'll see that you get home all right," Erler said.

"I don't need anybody," she said coldly. "Mr. Vernon has already volunteered."

"This here Vernon," Erler declared spitefully, "is the champion bronc buster of the world. Heard about that?"

"No."

ERLER drained his coffee-cup. Over the top of it his now too-bright eyes were fixed on White's face. The eyes suddenly widened.

"Lassiter," he said, as he put down his cup, "I hear you got a coupla wild horses that nobody but Vernon can ride."

"He ain't rid' 'em yet," Lassiter declared. "I doubt if any man could stay on the back of either of 'em for more'n six hops."

"How would you like to see a little real ridin', Miss Merrill?" Erler asked.

"Have a little private rodeo today?" White purred.

Erler started. It seemed that he would have been no more able to check that start than if he had been shot through with a charge of electricity. White saw and then White dropped his eyes. He, too, was unable to control himself. He could not keep a sudden glow of satisfaction out of his eyes. Thank God, he told himself, Erler was undoubtedly his man. He would have something to show for his more than three weeks of absence from his office.

"How about you and me ridin' them broncs, Vernon?" Erler asked.

"Oh, I dunno," White said. "It's goin' to be a hot and dusty day. A man ought to get his rest when he can. I—"

"I've always noticed," Erler said, "that a man who rides in his talk don't do so well when he gets up on a horse. Well, Miss Merrill, if you will let Mr. Lassiter bring you along, we will go down there and have a look at them wild animals. What do you think?"

"I hope Mr. Vernon isn't going to back out," Laura said.

"Why, ma'am, if you are anxious to see Erler hit the earth I will go and watch, too," White said.

"I got ten dollars that says I will stay with either or both of them broncs longer than any man here," Erler boasted.

"Which I am covering," said Lassiter. "I will put my money on the field against you."

"There ain't goin' to be no field," spoke up one of the ramblers. "Vernon has been shootin' off his mouth about his ridin'. Looks to me like it lays between him and Erler."

"How about you, Vernon?" Lassiter asked.

"Why, I'll do the best I can," White said.

"Gosh, you are modest all of a sudden," the other rambler contributed. "Where's all that tall talk you had?"

White understood how the situation had developed itself. The two ramblers were lining up with Erler. White supposed that they felt that in a way they were brothers to Erler. Lassiter's other hand would undoubtedly be loyal to Lassiter if a jam came. That would be three to three, a fair enough division, White supposed.

"Well, let's go," Lassiter said.

They rose and went out to get their horses.

CHAPTER VI

BY THE TOES

LASSITER still branded in the old-fashioned way, and he had built this outlying corral to be used at round-up time. It stood at the base of one of the highest of the hills. As the little party rode up to it, White looked at the two horses standing lazily within it. They didn't look as if they had an ounce of wild blood in them, but White knew that that didn't mean anything. A man on their backs could easily transform them.

Erler rode up to White, and the others drew near to them, since they were the principals.

"How do you like their looks, Vernon?" Erler asked.

"Why, they seem tame," White replied.

"Sure they're tame," Erler said slyly. "Look at 'em, heads droopin', eyes sleepy. I fear me there won't be much to this."

"Well, we got to make some little arrangements. What you got to offer?"

"What do you mean?" White asked, with seeming stupidity.

"Why, we got to have some rules to go by."

This was just what White wanted, but he only rubbed his chin and looked blank.

"Ain't you never seen a rodeo?" one of the ramblers asked.

White never had, and said so. He had never had time for rodeos. He had been a simple cowpuncher and then he had been sheriff. When he had been a puncher, he had had to work. Since he had been sheriff, he had had, it seemed to him, to work harder than ever.

"Well, the rules—" the rambler began.

"You keep out of this," White said coldly. "I ain't going to have a third party framing up rules. Either Erler or me might say later on that we didn't understand. Let Erler explain—if he knows anything about it."

"Oh, I don't know anything about reg'lar rules," Erler said with assumed carelessness, "but I can frame up a few. First, each man catches his own horse. We will draw to see which horse you take first, Vernon. When you take him up, one man will help you saddle him and slip a halter on him. Then you ride him. You ride with one arm free. You don't wrap your reins around your hand. You don't pull leather. And you scratch him at every jump. When he throws you, I ride him. Then we draw to to see who rides the next horse first."

"How about drawin' to see which takes the first horse first?" White asked. "I dunno why I should ride first."

"Because you are so good," Erler sneered.

"I'll chuck two bits in the air," Lassiter said. "Which of you will call it?"

"Spin it," Erler ordered, and as the coin went into the air, he called "heads."

The coin was tails when it lay in Lassiter's palm.

"You're first, Erler," Lassiter said.

Erler turned to the two ramblers. He settled himself in his saddle and he was at ease there. White watched him in fascination. He saw that his own display of mock vanity did not equal Erler's real vanity in this moment. The man's eyes were aglow. His whole body radiated energy. As he shook out his rope, he looked at Laura. White looked at her, too. A flame-like stab went through the sheriff. There was fascination in Laura's eyes, too. This Erler, White could not deny, was a graceful, handsome man, as he sat there in the saddle. His broad-brimmed hat covered his clipped hair and softened his face. White, with a little touch of bitterness, had to confess that he would appeal to any Western girl just now.

The two ramblers were standing, one at each end of the corral bars. They watched Erler.

"All right," Erler called softly.

THE men took down the bars and Erler rode slowly into the corral. The men replaced the bars. Erler rode up behind one of the horses. It moved over to the side of the corral, and then with a backward glance it started to trot around it. The other horse, after a moment of uncertainty, backed away. Erler sent his own horse directly at the one he wished to rope. That horse leaped and ran. When it was behind Erler, he suddenly wheeled his horse. His rope shot out. It caught up the two front feet of the running horse, and Erler's horse, trained to the minute, brought the rope taut. The first horse went down heavily, making a nose dive and its head striking the side of the corral. Erler was out of the saddle before the animal could move. He slipped the halter on it and made it get to its feet.

"Come on, you," he called to one of the ramblers.

The man went inside and gingerly approached the outlaw. He took hold of the halter rope and led the horse outside, keeping well away from him.

"Gimme the sack, Lassiter," Erler ordered.

He tucked the sack in around the halter, and then he took his own saddle from his horse and laid it gently on the wild horse's back. In darkness as it was, the horse only shivered. Erler climbed slowly into the saddle. White moved his horse up so that he was not ten feet from Erler.

"I'll ride with you to take him up when he throws you," White called softly.

"You 'tend to your own business," Erler said as softly but with an angry glare. "He ain't goin' to throw me."

"He might!"

Erler only muttered to himself. The rambler, at the horse's head, had kept his eyes on Erler's face. Now Erler nodded, with a final settling of his body in the saddle. The rambler loosened the sack and then suddenly drew it away.

The wild horse stood stock-still for perhaps ten seconds, sagging a little, its nostrils distended, its eyes mad with loathing for the thing on its back. Then it went up in the air. It came down with legs stiff and Erler was jarred in his seat. But he raked the horse fore and aft. His free hand went up and brushed his hat from his head. He waved the hat in the air.

"*Not* your first appearance," said White to himself, in satisfaction. "You hop to it like a veteran."

Like a veteran he stayed with it. The horse was vicious enough, but it could not dislodge that rider. White was a little surprised. He had expected Erler to be a good rider, but he had not expected him to be this good. This was not exactly in keeping with what White had heard.

Then it dawned upon the sheriff that Erler was extending himself to the utmost. White immediately saw that he had reasons for doing this. One was that he wanted to best White, and the other was that he wanted to make a showing before Laura Merrill.

Well, he was making a showing all right, for the horse had a neat little bag of tricks. He sunfished and he fence-cornered. He bucked straight away. Failing to dislodge the hateful thing on his back, he started to run, back arched, back hollowed, body in the form of a crescent now and then. Still Erler stayed with him.

"He's good," said Laura's voice behind White.

He looked back at her. Her eyes were still on the horse, now a quarter of a mile away.

"Horse and man all one piece," said the girl.

White looked back at Erler. For a moment he forgot why this contest had been staged. The fierce spirit of rivalry rose in him. He was no showman, but he had ridden many bucking horses in his time. His big drawback would be that when he had ridden such a horse, he had been trying to gentle him. He had had always to keep in mind that he was trying to convert a stubborn piece of horseflesh into something of value for working purposes. In this contest he had merely to ride a horse without any other end in view.

BY GOSH, he would ride a horse. He would ride a coupla them. Erler rode his mount for half a mile and then he sawed him around in a wide half circle. The horse bucked as it returned but not so viciously as when it had started off. By the time he reached the little group he was no more than hopping. One of the ramblers took him up and Erler was able to hop to the ground. He stood looking at Laura, a smile on his thin lips.

"A good ride," she said.

"I thank you, ma'am," said Erler. "Now we will see another. Mr. Vernon has been tellin' us about himself. I expect he will make me look like thirty cents."

White said nothing. One of the ramblers helped him blindfold the horse and change saddles. When the sack was taken from the horse's eyes, it merely stood looking around, rather dazed, for a minute. More as if it thought something was expected of it, it began to dance and to hop. White raked it and it hopped away. Then it settled into a trot. White brought it back.

"I busted it complete," Erler boasted.

"It'll buck again any time, be liable to," Lassiter said. "You ought to know that."

"I know what I see," Erler laughed. "Let's draw for that other horse."

White saw that Erler was standing close to Laura. There was a sickeningly satisfied look on the man's face. Laura's own expression was a little anxious. White had learned all he could learn about Erler now. He might have done what he had to do, but he was touched in his pride. He would ride that other horse if it was the last thing he ever did.

When he tried to rope the horse inside the corral, however, he was not so successful as Erler had been. The horse seemed to be possessed of uncanny wisdom. It dodged and turned and twisted and in five attempts White's rope fell short.

"Coax him," Erler called. "Be polite to him. Tell him you'll give him a lump of sugar if he'll be good. Put salt on his tail."

White felt a blaze of anger, but he fought it back. If he let Erler taunt him into a rage, he would never rope this horse. He took his time now, sending the horse around the corral half a dozen times. Then he tried again, and he caught the animal off balance. It went down as if a bullet had been sent into its heart.

"Nice one," came Laura's voice.

"In six tries," Erler chimed in.

White approached the fallen horse to slip the halter over its head. The animal proved vicious. It tried to strike at White with its tied forefeet. It tried to rise. When he extended a hand, it snapped at him as swiftly as any maddened dog. White took ten minutes to get the halter over his head. As the rambler took the end of the halter rope, White removed his rope and the horse bounded to his feet. It acted as if it were going to rear and begin to fight at once, but in the end it submitted to being led from the corral.

"Lemme tell you somethin', Vernon," Erler said. "You have caught a horse there. He is li'bel to kill you. He is a bad actor or I don't know where the bad actors come from. You better leave him alone."

"Afraid I'll ride him and then you will have to?" White asked.

"Hop him!" Erler snarled.

White had a moment of hesitation. Suppose this horse did hurt him? Suppose it killed him? Erler would be free then. He would get away. Lassiter would not hold him, for Lassiter did not know what White knew. That was the sheriff thinking things over. But White had been a puncher before he had been sheriff, and the puncher in him came to the surface. By gosh, he would ride this horse if it was the last thing he ever did.

CHAPTER VII

THE CRY OF FEAR

HE GLANCED at Laura Merrill and found her tensely sitting her horse near Lassiter. Her face had gone a little pale and there was a strained look in it. Yet he knew that she would not ask him not to try to ride the horse. Thought of asking him that had probably not entered her mind. Yet she was aware how dangerous this horse was.

He approached the horse with the sack in his hand. The horse stood still till he lifted his hands. Then it suddenly nipped at him and jumped away.

White turned on the rambler, who was at the end of the halter rope with his arms outstretched to put an even greater distance between himself and the animal.

"Come in a little closer," White ordered. "See if you can't hold him."

"Hell, I ain't ridin' him," the man said. "I'm on'y a hostler."

"Poor one at that," White said.

"I hope he breaks your neck," the rambler declared spitefully.

"You are takin' good care he doesn't break yours."

Taunted like that, the rambler came in a little. White edged up to the horse. He raised the sack inch by inch and then he suddenly put it over his face and held it against his head. The horse had started to jump, but once its sight was shut off, it stood still. White tucked in the sack and got the saddle on. He eased himself into the saddle as carefully as if the horse had been of glass and might crack into minute fragments under his weight.

He was barely seated, with his feet in the stirrups, when the rambler, with an evil grin splitting his lips, snatched the sack away. The horse did not stand still, getting his bearings, more than three seconds. Then he went mad. Compared to him, the horse that Erler had first ridden was a pet. This horse acted as if he had steel springs in his body. He was an able contortionist, too. For five minutes he was a twisting, leaping devil. In addition he turned his head every now and then and tried to get White's leg between his teeth. Failing, he went up high and came down with his legs as stiff as a board. White had never been aboard a horse like that before. Every time the horse hit the earth, White was jarred all through his body. His spine began to ache. There was a feeling of fulness in his nostrils, and his sight was blurred a little.

Failing to unseat him, the horse began to run. It ran no more than a hundred feet. Then it suddenly stopped and began its contortions again. If it had been a trick horse that could have been taught to turn and twist and leap like this it could have done no more. White stood it for what seemed an eternity. Then the horse turned about and renewed its activities. White, feeling that he was about to be thrown, seized the horn. Faintly, though Erler was not far away, he heard Erler utter a jeering yell.

"Pullin' leather! Pullin' leather! Choke it to death!"

Yes, he was pulling leather. He was hanging on for dear life. He had a notion, though it was not distinct enough to bother him, that he was about to be killed. He was aware that another horse rushed past him and turned beyond him. He did not know who the rider was, did not care. The full feeling had increased in his nostrils, but now it was accompanied by a sensation of dampness. He knew that he was beginning to bleed at the nose. Then the horse suddenly traded ends, and landing hard immediately reached for the sun.

White could not stay with him. He seemed to remain up in the air and the horse went down. His feet were somehow free. He had a sensation of falling a long distance and of hitting the ground with an awful jar. At once he began to fight for his breath, which seemed disinclined to go deeper than his throat. He was panting and gasping through wide-open lips when he felt his head lifted from the ground.

Dimly he was aware of Laura Merrill's face above his. He tried to shake his head but couldn't manage it. Laura sat down and took his head in her lap. That would have been pleasant enough in other circumstances, but now White, though his brain was not functioning overly well, had a picture of Erler standing apart and grinning at such softness, following complete failure. Complete failure! Gosh, yes! He had showed daylight; he had pulled leather; he had been cast from his seat. Now he was on the ground pretty nearly knocked out. He had a sweet nosebleed, too. Laura was dabbing at his nose with her handkerchief and the handkerchief was already wet.

W-e-l-l, the thing to do was to get on his feet and face Erler. Erler certainly had it on him. If Erler wanted to jeer, he would have to face it. He had to try twice before he managed to stand and then only with Laura's assistance. The hand who was loyal to Lassiter came up and put an arm about White, and White was glad to lean against it. Gradually his sight cleared. He looked about him. Erler did not seem to have a jeer or a sneer on tap. He was rather pale and there was an air of uncertainty about him.

"He's waitin' for you, Erler," White said, "but if I was you, I'd pass him up. You can't ride him."

"Mebbe not," said Erler.

"Let it go," Laura called to him.

ERLER turned about so that he could look at her fully. A sudden glow came into his eyes. He turned those eyes on the horse again, and White followed suit. White saw that the horse was dripping wet and was breathing hard from his exertions. His head was down and his eyes were half closed. The brute looked as if he might fall asleep on his feet.

That the horse was tired must have occurred to Erler. He picked up the sack and walked up to him. Lassiter's rope was about the animal's neck, but it had gone a little slack. Erler took hold of the halter rope and stood looking at the horse. It did not lift its head. Erler removed Lassiter's rope and still the horse stood there.

It was as if White could feel confidence flow into Erler. Erler's body came erect. There was a decided lift to his head. White understood what Erler's hope was—that the horse was too tired to buck again at once. It was a slender hope, White knew, for the sheriff was sure this horse would buck till he dropped. He would break his heart before he ceased to try to shake the manload from his back.

"Here," Erler called to the rambler who had served White.

The rambler came up cautiously and took hold of the halter rope. Erler eased up the sack, and to White's surprise got it over the horse's face without protest from the animal.

"He's going to ride him," he heard Laura say. "But never mind. You busted him if Erler does ride him."

"It doesn't matter," White said.

"Is he your man?" she asked in a whisper.

"Think so. We'll see in a minute. I don't want him hurt, but I hope that horse does his stuff."

Erler was easing himself into the saddle. The only movement the horse made was a slight, interested lifting of his head. Queer about bucking horses, White thought. You never could tell what they would do.

White's sight was clear again and he saw Erler settle himself in the saddle. The rambler was giving him all the time he wanted. Erler moved a number of times, making sure of his seat and also testing out the horse as to what the horse's intentions were. Then he nodded to the rambler. The latter snatched the sack away and leaped back.

For a space the horse stood still. What followed was breath-taking to the spectators, so suddenly it came. The horse threw himself up, threw himself over backward. It was the intentional back throw. It had taken Erler unawares and he was pinned beneath the saddle. The horse luckily fell away from him. White knew that if Erler could keep his head, he would not be hurt unless he were already hurt. Pommel and cantle would keep his leg from being crushed.

But Erler did not seem to think of his luck. As he sprawled away from the horse, a cry broke from his lips. It was a cry freighted with fear. It was a cry torn from Erler's very soul. The man, White was sure, was terror stricken.

White looked at Laura.

"Our man," he said.

Then he ran to Erler's aid.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO RIDE AWAY

WHEN White got to Erler, he found the man as pale as a ghost. His lips quivered as he muttered to himself. White had run part of the distance toward the horse and had covered the remainder cautiously. The animal seemed to be surprised to find himself on the ground, though he had thrown himself backward intentionally. He lay with his head stretched out.

"Get me out of this," Erler panted.

White put his hands on the horse's head and held it down. Lassiter came up and together they twisted the horse's head so that he would scramble to his feet away from Erler. When he had done so, Erler lay for a moment in a kind of stupor of relief. Lassiter bent over him. White had hold of the halter rope, but all of a sudden the horse began to try to buck off the saddle and broke away. He ran wildly across the flat, bucking at every jump.

"Hey, you two fellas, take him up," Lassiter yelled.

The two ramblers hesitated briefly and then they mounted and scampered after the wild horse.

"You're not hurt, are you, Erler?" White asked.

Erler drew up his legs and pushed them down again. He sat up and then got slowly to his feet.

"No, I guess I ain't hurt," he said.

"Want to fork that horse again?" Lassiter grinned.

"I expect White would stick right in the saddle if a horse back throwed on him," Erler snarled.

"Sure, and come up with him when he come up," Lassiter answered. "I win our little bet."

"We were even on the first horse and White pulled leather and was throwed by the second," Erler said. "If that ain't an even break, I don't know."

"Well, let it ride that way," Lassiter agreed cheerfully. "And now that our little rodeo is all done, I want you two boys to take a ride along the hills and see how everything is shapin' up."

He did not look at Erler as he made this announcement, and White, who was watching Erler, saw the latter shoot a keen glance at Lassiter. Then Erler looked at White. White saw no need for playing his rôle of dull braggart any longer. His face was hard as he steadily met Erler's eyes.

"Where's my horse, then?" Erler asked.

"Right over here."

Erler's eyes went across the flat. The two ramblers had overtaken the wild horse and were bringing him in. Erler walked over to his horse. He busied himself with the cinches till the ramblers were near. Then he hopped up.

"I'm goin' to have a look at that horse," he said.

White was close behind him as he came up to the two men. They had removed the saddle from the bucker and he was now docile. Erler opened his lips to speak to one of the men, but White forged up along side of him.

"Well?" Erler snapped. "What do you want?"

"Waitin' for you to take that ride," White said coldly.

Erler regarded White suspiciously. He could not fail to note the difference in White's manner. White knew that he had been going to say something confidentially to the two men, but White's presence, as he had intended it should do, prevented that.

"Me and this fella is under orders to ride around for a while," Erler said spitefully. "We are goin' over along the hills. See you later."

"Wait a minute and we will go with you," one of the men said.

"Lassiter has sent Erler and me," said White. "You had better see Lassiter."

Erler shot a meaning look at the speaker, and then he turned to White.

"Come on," he said.

HE SPURRED his horse and the horse galloped away. White followed. Erler did not slacken his pace till he had reached the base of the hills. Then he stopped suddenly and turned his horse, so that he faced White.

"What you got on your mind?" he asked.

"Lassiter's business—mebbe."

"Like hell! You wanted to get me over here for a reason of your own. Think I'm blind. What is it?"

"You got a gun on you?" White asked.

"Mebbe I have, mebbe I haven't."

"I haven't," White said.

"Well, I haven't either. Now, what is it?"

White sat looking steadily at the man. Here in the clear light of the morning he could study Erler closely. More and more he thought the man resembled the description which had been in the circular.

"I been lookin' for you for a long time," White said at last.

"Lookin' for me? Why, you're jealous. That's what's the matter with you. You're jealous of me, about that girl."

That seemed so ridiculous to White that it did not anger him.

"Know who I am, Erler?" he asked.

"The world's prize dumb bell," Erler answered.

"Possibly—but still I am the sheriff of this county."

For a moment Erler sat perfectly still on his horse. Then pallor, like the pallor of sudden, deathly illness, crept up over his face. He wet his lips and stirred nervously in his seat.

"Sheriff?" he asked. "What do you mean, sheriff?"

"I mean just what I say. I'm sheriff of this county, and I have traveled the county over lookin' for you."

"What you been lookin' for me for?"

"You're Thompson. You're wanted for robbery south o' here."

Erler had been holding his horse with its tail to the sheer, rocky wall of the hill. White's horse was in front of Erler's, so that the two animals were head to head. Now Erler suddenly pulled his horse to one side and spurred him. White had anticipated some such move. He spurred his own horse and that animal leaped forward, cutting in ahead of Erler's horse so that it was forced up against the wall.

White reached for Erler's rein but failed to catch it. Erler had leaned to him in the same moment, and he suddenly shot out his right fist. It caught White on the side of the jaw and White slipped over in his saddle. Erler leaned far and tried to land another blow, but luckily for White it fell short.

For White had been stunned by that powerful blow. It had rocked him to his toes and half blinded him for a moment. When his sight cleared, Erler's horse was speeding away from him. White took after the horse in a hot race across the flat.

AT FIRST Erler's intention had seemed to be to run away from the hills across the flat. Knowing that White had no gun, he was not afraid thus to expose himself. However, he found the going there harder, because of the sand, than it was closer up to the hills, and he cut back toward them. White had not left the line of the hills, and he gained a little from this maneuver of Erler's. They raced so for a quarter of mile, White failing to gain perceptibly.

White reached a turn in the line of the hills and disappeared around it. As White sped toward it, he turned his head and saw two men riding toward him across the flat. They were coming at breakneck speed, and he had a notion that they were the two ramblers. He was sure that they were not friends of Erler's particularly, but they would aid Erler if they could. Doubtless they had been in jams themselves, and now probably they had begun to suspect White. This would be a break for them in the dull monotony of every day life.

White, after his first backward glance, paid no attention to them. He reached the curve of the hills and sped around it. Erler had ridden for a quarter of a mile and then he had broken out into the flat again. White saw that his intention was to circle back.

The sheriff had no difficulty in guessing what that meant. Erler, too, had caught sight of the two men and he believed, as White did, that they would help him. He was trying to circle back to them.

WHITE'S aim then became the immediate capture of Erler. Once Erler was his prisoner, he could point out to the two ramblers that they were interfering with the law. Whether that would have weight with them he did not know. It was the best he could do, however.

Erler was calling on his horse for all it had now. White, however, had the shorter distance to cover, and he sent his own horse at top speed. The two horses were presently converging toward each other. In a few minutes White could see Erler's face plainly as Erler turned it toward him. Erler's face was twisted with passion. All the hate which lay just below the surface was on that surface now. Erler, White knew, was in a mood to kill. He was in a mood to kill not only from necessity but wantonly.

The two horses were not fifty feet apart now. White saw Erler's eyes widen. The man was desperate. He was mad from anger. And yet fear could touch him. His fear now was occasioned by the fact that if the two horses converged further they would crash into each other. White, seeing that fear in Erler's eyes, kept on. Erler continued for three leaps of his horse. Then he suddenly swerved the animal to one side and pulled him down.

"You cussed fool," he screamed.

White was carried past Erler's horse, but he came round and made for Erler. This time he did not try to seize Erler's rein. He grappled with the man himself. Erler fought back and for a time fended him off, trying as he now and then freed an arm to send his fist against White's jaw again. But White had been expecting that, and now he guarded himself. One hand closed in the front of Erler's shirt and the other arm went about Erler's waist. Erler promptly grappled with him. The horses shied apart, and Erler was dragged from his saddle. White dropped him to the ground and jumped down beside him.

Erler, screaming to relieve the intensity of his anger, seized White about the legs as White came down. White was pulled off his feet and struck heavily on the back of his head. He was dazed, but when he felt Erler, his scream gone to a mutter now, begin to crawl along his body to reach his throat with his clawing fingers, he roused himself. He came to a sitting position and struck Erler in the face. That stopped Erler, but at the same moment the two ramblers dashed up and flung themselves from their horses.

White saw that there was no time to lose. He pushed Erler away from him and then thrust him further, and then he got swiftly to his feet.

"My advice to you two boys is to keep out of this," he said, his voice icy. "My name is White. I'm the sheriff. If you don't want to hook up with the law, you'll stay where you are."

The change in White must have impressed the two ramblers. He was no longer that silly braggart they had known. He was a cold, determined young man as he stood there. However, these men had no use for officers of the law. They had never been in any serious trouble, but they had had to listen to such cold words of advice as they were getting now.

"I expect you will be commandin' us to arrest him next," one of them sneered.

"I don't need any help in arresting him," White said. "You fellas just keep out of it."

"Mebbe," the second man said.

White saw that he had turned his eyes on Erler and a sudden grin had come to his lips. White wheeled. He wheeled just in time to receive a stone, flung by Erler. It struck him on the cheek bone just below the temple and laid open the flesh. White could feel the warm trickle of his blood. Again he was a little dazed. Also he knew that Erler was coming at him. Before he could recover himself, Erler had struck him. The blow was short, however, and it did little harm. Then Erler grappled with him.

The blow from the stone had robbed the sheriff of his strength for the moment. Erler was bending him back, and he knew that suddenly Erler would twist his body and throw him. Anger flooded through White, and it brought strength with it. He had fooled around with his fella too long. He had given him too much chance. He should have arrrested him back there when the riding had ended, but he had not wanted to do that in Laura's presence. He had wanted to spare her any scene of violence which might ensue. If there were no scene of violence, Erler's language, till it was stopped, wouldn't be fit for her to hear.

So WHITE braced himself, stooping a little. He succeeded in breaking Erler's hold, and he aimed a blow at Erler. Erler dodged and stepped back. At the same moment there was a rush of horses behind White, and he knew that Lassiter, Laura, and the other man had arrived. Well, that would dispose of the two ramblers anyhow. However, here he was in a fight with Laura looking on, the very thing which he had sought to avoid. He couldn't ask Lassiter or the ranch hand to help him. He and Erler were evenly enough matched. Besides old Lassiter would have ridiculed such a request. Old Lassiter loved a fight.

"Eat him up, White," he encouraged. "He's the man you want, ain't he?"

"He's the man," White said.

"Lay into him, then."

The renewal of the charge that he was wanted enraged Erler again. He sprang for White and this time he succeeded in striking White on the mouth. White spat out blood. It is one thing for a determined man merely to fight. It is another thing to fight in the presence of an attractive girl and to be the first to lose blood. White knew that he was a sight. There was blood on his lips; there was blood on his cheek. He kept his face way from Laura, and now he bored in.

It was at this moment that a theory came to White, a theory which he never afterward surrendered. That theory was that when a man is fighting for some one besides himself, a woman preferably, his chances to win are increased many fold. As White bored in, Erler came toward him also. White shot out his right fist. Erler took it on the point of the jaw just when the maximum of power was behind it. He went down like a stone and lay still.

"Heck," said old Lassiter. "All over so soon?"

White fumbled out his handkerchief and wiped his face. Then he turned to the two ramblers.

"Want something?" he asked.

"Us?" they asked together; and one answered for both: "Gosh, no! We would have helped you if it was necessary."

Laura came up beside White.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"Not a bit," he answered.

"I see," she smiled. "Not even a scratch."

CHAPTER IX

HOW 'TWAS

SHERIFF WHITE came down the rocky slope toward Lassiter's the next afternoon. He did not stop at Lassiter's, however. There was no one about the Lassiter place, though White knew that the cook was undoubtedly in the kitchen.

White went on till he came to the Merrill place. This sheriff was a man who would keep right on going if he knew he was about to be confronted by a perilous situation, but now he paused. That might have been thought strange, for there was no hint of peril about the Merrill house. It slept in the bright sunshine. After his recent adventures White might have been expected to welcome such quiet, but he only stared at the house as if he were perplexed.

Very likely Laura Merrill had not been watching for him. Doubtless she came to the front door merely to look at the sunshine or to get a breath of air. It wasn't her fault, if fault there was at all, that Sheriff White was in the road on his horse. The girl didn't share White's hesitation. She waved her hand and he took that as an invitation to ride in.

In he rode and dismounted before the door. He looked at Laura, and Laura smiled. It was just a cheerful kind of a smile, conveying nothing to White particularly, except possibly that she was not displeased at his having come.

"I—er—had some business over this way, ma'am," White said, "and I thought I would stop and—"

"Mercy," the girl exclaimed, "is there more trouble over here?"

"Oh, no! This was—er—a civil matter. So I thought I would drop in and tell you about what happened over at Lassiter's. I mean, how come I went after that fella Erler the way I did. By the way, I been wonderin' what Lassiter did to them two ramblers."

"Nothing," she said. "He needed them, and he said he saw no reason for letting them go. He said they were fairly good hands, and even fairly good hands were hard to get over here."

"I will keep my eyes on those boys," White said. "I expect I will have to ride over this way once a week anyway while they are here."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," Laura smiled.

White glanced at her to see if there was more in that than the words indicated, but there didn't seem to be more. Laura was only looking at him in that frank way she had.

"I expect, ma'ma, you have been wonderin' why we staged that rodeo and all that," White pursued. "Well, it come about in this way: All I had to go on at first about this fella that called himself Erler was a description in the circular. I knew that description might fit about every fourth man I would meet. So I wired for more. I had to wire four times before I got anything that looked good to me, and then I had to tell a little lie, ma'am. A little lie in a good cause ain't so bad, is it, ma'am?"

"Why, no," she answered.

"I told 'em I had a clew," White confessed, "but I didn't have none. Next day they came through with a lot of stuff, and I hit the trail."

"What reason did you have for thinking that Erler might be in your county?" she asked.

White blushed like a schoolboy.

"Ma'am," he said, "I was lookin' for notoriety. I see that plain enough now. When that circular come, I was sitting in my office with my feet on the desk. I was gettin' kind of sour on my sheriff's job. I said to myself it was no job for a grown man. Then I got to thinkin' about this fella Erler. I said to myself that he must be in some man's county, so why not in mine? There wasn't a thing to do, and—well, I reckon I felt like taking a ride."

"Restless," she said. "Are you often restless?"

"Sometimes when things are dull, but, ma'am, I have always worked in this county, notwithstandin' what I told Erler I have never been a rambler. So you see my restlessness has never done me a great deal of harm. So I rode out lookin' for this man Erler. You know what happened except about this dope I got by wire.

"That said that Erler had played the small rodeos here and there. He never got any firsts but he always come back for more. That's why they didn't have a picture of him. He never got in the limelight sufficient even at those small shows. Now, ma'am, I ask you why would a man come back for more if he never got anywhere in the show game?"

She didn't have to ponder that long.

"Why, because he was vain," she said. "He liked to show himself before the crowds even if he didn't get much apple-sauce."

Sheriff White beamed at her.

"That's it," he said. "Now, what would happen to a puncher that kept following them shows and never dragged down anything?"

"He would be short of money."

Sheriff White flopped one long leg over his other knee. He continued to beam.

"Exactly. And if he was unprincipled he would rob to get the money. Which is what Erler did. He robbed a postoffice, was seen, but got away. That's how they had the description of him.

"WHEN I saw Erler at Lassiter's he fitted the description as well as any man would fit it, but I ask you to believe, ma'am, that I wouldn't cast no disrepute on any man. I didn't have enough to go on to hold Erler. I saw that I would have to fit him into a picture of some kind, and the frame would be a rodeo. There wasn't no rodeo, so we had to arrange one. I couldn't get the fella started all by myself. Lassiter and me and them punchers didn't make enough of a bunch of spectators. So I thought if we had a girl for him to shine before— Well, ma'am, I have to ask your pardon for dragging you into that thing. When me and Lassiter set out, I thought we would just find a—a—why, just a girl."

"And what did you find?" she asked innocently.

White was vividly reminded of the time when Erler had hit him on the side of the head with the stone. He was just about as ready now as he had been then.

"Er—er—well, you see, ma'am—" he began.

He didn't believe that the sound of a galloping horse had ever been quite so welcome as that sound was now when it came suddenly to his ears. He rose from his chair with great promptitude. Laura rose with him.

"I hope there isn't more trouble," she said.

He was moving toward the door and she overtook him in a little run. Poor little girl, she was nervous. Leastways he seemed to think she was nervous, for he reached out and took her hand as they gained the door together. She let the hand, a very cool hand as it happened, lie in his only briefly. He stole a look at her as she withdrew it, but she wasn't blushing or nothin', so he reckoned she hadn't been offended. Doggone! she seemed not to have noticed his action much. Not very encouraging, that!

He let her pass through the door ahead of him, and then he stepped down beside her.

"No trouble," he said. "It's only old Lassiter."

OLD LASSITER flung himself from his horse in front of the door and faced White. There was contempt in his eyes.

"Next time you go trailin' a man, you git somebody else to help you," he said, "here I give you my valuable time and first time you come over here you ride right by my place without so much as a how-de-do or go to hell. Say, you call that polite?"

"Why, I didn't see anybody around your place, Mr. Lassiter," White defended himself.

"You didn't even look in," Lassiter stormed. "My cook told me so. You went right by. You had somethin' to tell, and you had to ride over here before you could spill it. Oh, well, the man that expects gratitood is a fool."

"I am truly grateful to you for everything you have done for me, Mr. Lassiter," the sheriff declared.

"Come in, Mr. Lassiter, and we will tell you all about it," the girl said.

Lassiter followed them into the house, though, by his manner, he showed no sign of relenting toward White. White told him what he had told the girl.

"There is one thing more," White said. "Mebbe it is the most convincing thing of all. You mind when that horse went down atop Erler how he yelled."

"Yell of fear," Lassiter nodded. "Ain't heard it more'n half a dozen times in all my life."

"Once Erler was at a rodeo," White said. They had a particularly bad horse there. First day that horse busted a rider's leg for him. Erler was to ride him next day. He wouldn't do it. Too much hoss, he said. Got a yellow streak in him, see?"

"I'd have rode that horse if he had bucked me into heaven—or t'other place," Lassiter declared. "Well, has this fella Erler confessed?"

"No; he's not the confessing kind," White answered, "but he's our man. I spent most of last night talking to him, and if he contradicted himself once he did it fifty times. He can't give an account of his movements. There will be an officer up here to look him over in a few days. I told him that, and he said it would be worth quite a little to him if he could walk out of my jail."

"Tryin' to bribe you, eh?" Lassiter asked. "Well, that makes it a dead open-and-shut case. You ridin' back my way, White?"

WHITE didn't want to ride back his way just yet. Still he couldn't think of an excuse. He started to rise.

"Mr. White is staying for supper," Laura said casually.

"Oh yes, I want to meet Miss Merrill's brother," said White brightly.

"Won't you stay, too, Mr. Lassiter?" Laura asked.

"I got to get home," said Lassiter. "I would like a word with the sheriff outside if you don't mind, ma'am."

"Certainly," Laura said.

They went outside.

"You rode clean over here just to tell Miss Merrill about how you come to suspicion that fella?" Lassiter asked.

"She asked me that," White said. "I told her I had some business over here. I—"

"A poor start, young fella. Lyin'! Lyin' don't get you no place with a girl like Laura. Better go in and tell her the truth."

"Why—" White began.

Lassiter hopped his horse.

"You'll never get a better tip from no man," he declared, "and, say, there's one thing more: All you was doin' yesterday was ketchin' a crook, huh?"

"Why, yes."

"White," said Lassiter, "you will have a lot to answer for some day. For a while yesterday you forgot what your business was. You was showin' off before Laura Merrill. I watched you. Vanity! How it runs in man! More, by gosh, than in woman!"

"Why, you—" White spluttered.

But away went Lassiter, laughing and waving his hat.

White stood for a moment looking at the far horizon before he turned into the house. The young sheriff's face was red as he confronted the girl.

"Ma'am," he said, "I didn't tell you the exact truth when you asked me a question a while ago. I said I come over here on business. I said I thought I would stop and tell you about those matters. Fact is, I rode clear over here from the county seat just to see you and talk to you for a minute, ma'am. I hope you will overlook the little lie I told."

He stopped, for he knew that if he kept on he would begin to stammer and would look ridiculous. Miss Laura Merrill looked at him gravely for a moment, and then she suddenly smiled. The color in her cheeks was a little deeper.

"It was nice of you to ride 'way over here just for that, Mr. White," she said.

THE END

Off the Trail

A Grim Story of the Australian Desert

By Louis Kaye

SINCE Frazer had never known God he was no apostate when he took off his hat to the devil. He was merely following the line of least resistance, and he owed fealty to nothing on the earth or above the earth. Most likely he regarded the devil as a friend rather than as a master. It is certain that it was his most prideful boast that he was a free and unfettered man. Yet in truth he had nothing to back up this boast since the country had plagued and broken and mastered him.

The writing was on the wall and Frazer read it. He was not alarmed by it, but he was sickened. You can't fight something for ten years only to be beaten in the end and not feel sick about it. There was the possibility that Frazer had not been fashioned right in the beginning and that his was an iniquitous heritage. But let that pass. The thing that is known is that the desert had called his bluff and thrown the cards in his face. All Frazer had to do now was to pick up the cards and begin afresh along different lines.

The devil might have whispered the plan in his ear, but most likely it was his own conception. He nursed it in his brain for two days and then began to act on it. He had a little gold, and with it he bought a horse, water-bags, ration-sacks, a blanket and such stores as he could conveniently carry. He had no pack horse, and not money enough to buy one. Anyway, most likely it would only prove a hindrance in the end.

He had come in to Conyer's Drift a week back. At any rate, he had come within sight of the thirty iron roofs glittering in the rays of the sun. They found him lying in the sand along the track, and carried him to the hotel. When he knew anything again it was that he was lying on a bed and men were standing by ready to permit him to sip water in judicious quantities from a tin pannikin.

His camel was out in the desert somewhere. He had almost forgotten where it had died. His pack was out in the desert with the camel. He had not come through with anything save the clothes he stood up in and his rifle—and to his weapon he had clung as to life itself—and that little scraping of gold.

He was not unknown to the settlement. Strictly speaking, it was his headquarters. He had been in the habit of making in to it once every three months or so. There were always plenty of faces around that he knew, and he had got along well with the Irish publican and called the girl who served behind the bar by her first name.

The place was a haven to him and a home. He would come wearily in from the desert and feel a warmth around his heart at meeting men he knew and sharing their company in the bar and gambling with them through half the night. And he would look forward to seeing the girl at the hotel; he would pay her compliments and crack jokes with her. Then one day he told her he would marry her, and that really was the beginning of the end of his fight with the desert country.

But it was not really the girl's fault that Frazer got broken by the wild. That is to say, she was no conscious offender. It was merely that Frazer wanted gold for her, and to get that gold he rode with death at his elbow and took chances that he had never taken before.

And he was a man who had taken many chances. He had chased fortune in the shape of yellow metal almost everywhere. He knew West Australia from Kalgoorlie to Hall's Creek and round and down through the De Grey cattle country to the Murchison. Too many times had he gazed across a desert glaring under the hot sun. Water that was not fit for a horse to drink even when boiled had moistened his throat almost daily. Times had been when he had gone without drink at all and when the black crows had circled low over him and waited for him to die. Men, speared by blacks or conquered by the sand wastes, had lain in his arm and wept like children or blasphemed to the bitter and inevitable end. A myriad of hot suns had burned his skin till it was the color of an old saddle, and his face was thin and his eyes deep-set. The heat had eaten into his body and sapped the vitality out of it. In ten years he had aged twenty, so that at forty he looked fifty. Yet all that time he had battled along with scarce ever a thought of giving in.

THEN he had read the writing on the wall. He had journeyed too far after the yellow metal this last time. Death had been too constantly at his elbow. The sunshine had soaked into him and melted his back-bone.

Mirages had tormented him to the point of madness. Loneliness had eaten into him like a canker. There had only been the somber forms of prowling blacks and of hungry crows and the tawny flash of a dingo through the scrub.

And now he thought of killing. His luck was no good on the trail of the yellow metal. If he had had any luck it should have revealed itself in ten years. But he never saw a hint of it. So he would take a little of somebody else's luck. He would take a man's gold in exchange for some lead. He would run crooked since it no longer paid him to run straight.

And he went very callously about it. There was much of the animal in Frazer now, and most likely there had always been much of the animal in him. But now all that had held it in check was fallen. He set out to kill as a wolf would set out to kill. He had the cruelty of a beast of prey, and his was an animal cunning.

Day had not broken when he left Conyer's Drift. It was not an unusual thing for men to pull out of the settlement while it was still enwrapped in darkness; and in the summer it was the custom. The days were hot and long—terribly hot and long, some found them—and it was wise to force your travel at the two cool ends of the day and rest through the mid-hours when heat shimmered over the land and snakes basked in the sun.

But this morning Frazer was the only one heading out along the track. There had been nobody to say good-by to for nobody was up. At dawn they would find Frazer gone, but it was incumbent upon no one to say whither he was going and it was a common thing for men you had played cards with at night to be gone in the morning.

At a dam by the settlement Frazer watered his horse and then headed east. There was a track east for a half-day's journey, thence it petered out and a man took his direction from the sun. Yet he could not always choose his way; he had to travel from water-hole to water-hole, and water-holes were never in a direct line. Sometimes he had to head at right angles to the way he wanted to go; he zigzagged across the face of the land as though afraid of it. And it was true that it bullied him and plagued him and thwarted him at all times.

There was no more drink for Frazer's horse till dusk. At midday he had halted by a reed-grown swamp where paper-barks afforded shade and a sprinkling of grass-trees drooped in the heat. But the sun had dried the swamp till its bed was a mere mass of parched and cracked mud.

AT DUSK, while the bay animal sucked yellow water from a dam, Frazer built a fire and made his tea. He ate corned beef and canned beans and drank the black tea seated on the blanket he had taken from the saddle and spread on the ground. His horse was hobbled and left to forage for itself. A few reeds grew by the dam, and it plucked them out of the soft earth and chewed the succulent roots.

Frazer rolled himself in his blanket while it was still early, and slept with his head pillowed on his saddle. When the dew settled coolly on his cheek and woke him the day was not come. But the dew and the position of the stars told him the time.

There was a long strip of country lightly timbered with stunted white-gums and dotted with spinifex. It ran south and Frazer followed it, though it was not the way he wanted to go. His way lay due east, but he had to think of water for his horse. Anyhow, he would rather be sighted riding south than riding east, and most likely somebody would sight him before the day was out. Twenty-four hours in the saddle would fetch him to a tract of land scarce traversed except by nomadic blacks, but here he was on the route of men journeying in to the settlement.

An hour off noon, just when he was preparing for his midday spell, two camels appeared on a sand plain to the north. They headed for the timbered strip where Frazer had halted. On one of the camels rode a young black and on the other was a white man.

He was a lanky individual of about Frazer's own age. There was a beard on his face short enough to show that he was usually clean shaven and long enough to show he had not used the razor for a week or two. On the camel he rode and the camel the black rode was packed a prospector's gear.

When the camels drew up and were "hooshed" to their knees, the riders dismounted and stretched their cramped limbs. Frazer had never seen the black before but the white man he recognized. He had once sat up all night at Conyer's Drift playing poker and in the morning Williams had all the money.

"If you're heading into the settlement you'll have your chance to try your luck again," Williams grinned. "I'm heading there just so fast as the darn old water-tanks can carry me. Meantime, if you can show me a plug of tobacco, I'd be glad. Charlie and I haven't had a smoke in two days."

As he filled his pipe Williams looked around. His eyes had grown used to noticing things, but he had not noticed till now the nature of Frazer's pack. He had expected to see a prospector's outfit.

"I lost my gear last trip," Frazer explained. "I'm not heading out again."

Williams raised his eyebrows. "So? Where you going then?"

"Laverton," said Frazer. "I've been bucking the country ten years and it's time I got a spell. I reckon to get down to Perth before Christmas, but I'll hang around Laverton for a while."

"Well, there's nothing in following up your crazy luck," admitted Williams. "If I was the Jonah you are I'd feel like changing my territory too. But I can't say I've done so bad." He puffed complacently at his pipe.

An hour after noon they parted. Looking back from a rise of land Frazer saw the two camels jogging along side by side. "Well, they'll know in the Drift which way I've headed," he muttered. "Just as well to throw 'em off the trail."

He followed the timber strip south till it thinned and died on the hot edge of a sand plain, and then he headed east. Sand lay under his horse's hoofs, but in the far distance he sighted timber. As he rode toward it a hot north wind, sprung up since noon, gathered force and sent sand whirling south in small spirals. The hollows made by the hoofs of the bay horse, filled up as though an invisible broom swept sand into them. Frazer looked back and saw his trail blotting out, and the sight seemed good to him.

ON THE eve of the third day out of the settlement he unsaddled by a claypan and left his horse feeding at the end of a stake-rope. The reason why he did not hobble it this time was because he thought he might need it quickly, and a horse that had got used to hobbles could lead him a fine chase if it got the idea into its head. But he unsaddled lest the animal should roll.

There was no sun as he lay belly down in the scrub on a ridge and gazed into a gully, but night had not as yet had time to darken the land. Frazer could see a bark hut and the smoke that rose from a tin chimney. There was a dog lying in the sand by the hut, and he could see that too. It was a black dog and it was in silhouette against the white sand. Frazer shot it. He saw it leap into the air and then roll over and lie still. He saw a man rush foolishly out of the hut, and he shot him too.

For ten minutes or more Frazer lay still and gazed at the man on the ground. Then he worked off through the scrub in a wide semicircle. When he came out of the scrub on the other side of the gully it was dark. He could see an oblong glow of light that was the door of the hut. He used the scrub to screen him till he was within twenty yards of the fallen figure. He chanced the rest and walked swiftly forward, his rifle held ready to shoot from the hip.

Yet he had run no risk. The man lay on his back and gazed with lifeless eyes at the stars, and his rifle lay a couple of yards away in the sand. Frazer entered the lighted hut and found gold in a canvas sack under the bunk. There was much gold, more than Frazer had ever expected to find, more than anybody knew the dead man had possessed. Half of it left behind and a rifle cunningly arranged beside the fallen figure would make a killing look like a suicide and as though it had never been a robbery.

But Frazer would take all the gold. It was probable that he reasoned that nobody was likely to come to this tract of land, anyway. The dead man had never been liked, and there was no one who would go out of his way to pay him a visit. A man would have to travel out of his way to make that gully and even anybody driven in from the desert for water would not head this way for it. And any blacks who found the dead man would never say anything about it lest the whites hold them responsible for the job. So Frazer had little to worry him on that score. If it were not that the gold would arouse curiosity that he might not be able to satisfy, he could head for Conyer's Drift and no one would know they were gambling with a killer.

He packed the gold into two double thick canvas sacks shaped like water-bags and bearing little leather straps so they could be buckled to the saddle dees. Then he turned to the fire that burned in the hut and doused it with a bucket of sand.

He looked round the hut at the dead man's belongings—his frying-pan and tin dish and plates and pannikins and billy-can; the bunk with the gray blankets neatly spread; the few papers and magazines that had found their way to this far region; an old pipe and boots, and clothes hanging from a peg; a double-barreled shotgun and an open box of rifle bullets on a shelf—and he felt no compunction at his deed.

He was as unremorseful as a wolf that had killed; all humanity had gone out of him. The desert had driven him to the wall and all the goodness he had ever known had fallen from him like a loosened cloak and left him stripped to his naked and callous and bitter soul. The light of an oil lamp fell on his face as he turned to extinguish it, and the yellow glimmer found his eyes and they were as cold and expressionless as death.

SOME flour in ration-sacks he took from the hut. The box of cartridges on the shelf he also took, but the rifle that lay in the sand beside the dead man he would not bother about. He closed the plank door behind him and faced up the slope and walked off through the darkened bush. There was no light to guide him to his camp, but he went to it as unerringly as though a beacon flare directed the way.

He placed most of his rations and the box of cartridges under his saddle and stretched himself out on his blanket. His horse was foraging quietly at the end of its stake-rope, and he could hear an occasional snort as it blew dry sand from its nostrils or freed them of the tiny ants picked up while feeding. Stars gleamed in a sky almost unclouded yet gave strangely meager light to the bush.

Long before day he wakened and prepared to break camp. He saddled and bridled and coiled the stake-rope. The sacks of gold he fastened to the nickel dees, and the water-bags and ration-sacks; and he rolled his blanket and strapped it across the pommel. The cartridges he had brought from the hut he slipped into a leather ammunition pouch, and swung into the saddle, his rifle cushioned in his rolled blanket. Then he headed due east, traveling steadily since he was not riding light and he wanted to nurse the strength of his horse.

The stars dimmed in the sky and the gnarled trunks of stunted white-gums showed against the somber background of scrub and foliage. The dawn found him on the edge of a sand plain dotted but sparsely with clumps of timber growth.

He skirted north along the edge of the sand-plain for a matter of five miles, and then headed east again. He rode east till the sand plain spread away behind him in a shimmer of heat and ahead the desert lay in flat and dry leagues. The unbroken skyline was like a skyline at sea except that it danced and wavered in the heat.

The sun smote the sand with its rays. The rays burned Frazer through his cotton shirt as though he stood by a furnace fire. The glare flung off by the sand caused his eyes to narrow till they were mere slits. Moisture trickled down his tanned skin ceaselessly, and his horse sweated curiously in patches. There were patches of sweat round its shoulders and flanks, but mostly the sweat was dried by the sun before ever it had time to soak the coat.

Although Frazer was heading into the desert again, he was offering himself no longer to its menace. This was no long ride out into the unknown where even a camel might die of thirst and leave a man at the mercy of the sand wastes or the scrub and gullies that mocked with promise of water that never existed. The way was planned. Just across the skyline was an oasis, and beyond that oasis was another oasis, and at each there was water. And beyond them there was timbered country, and a man could follow that country south and then back round west and dodge the desert. Frazer knew the land, and knew he would be as safe in it as man and horse could be. All the desert he had to face lay in the strips between the oases.

There was no shade for the noon halt, but so his horse could rest in some fashion Frazer got off and walked. The horse followed the sagging bridle reins, its head held low with its weariness. And wearily Frazer walked, for the heat of the sand below and the downpour of heat from the sky melted his strength.

He drank often from the water-bags that he could refill at the oasis ahead. He drank so often that he emptied two of them before midafternoon came around, and there was only one bag left full and one half full. Thirst was ever with him, no matter how much he drank, but hunger was not. He had eaten nothing at midday, but the body craved little nourishment in that heat.

It was water that meant life in the desert country. Always a man sought water before he sought food, for he could live a fortnight or more without food, but he could not live three days without water except he did not have to travel. It was the dry stages, the bitter battle with the sand, that weakened a man and broke his body and his will. And it was the mirages that applied the finishing touch that was to drive reason altogether from his mind and leave him a pitiful weeping thing under the burning sun.

NOT till an hour before dusk did Frazer mount again. The heat of the sand had made the soles of his boots like pieces of hot iron and his feet had blistered so that they smarted at every step. But by saving his horse he was saving himself, and it mattered little how his feet blistered just so long as there was a saddle for him to ride in.

The hour of daylight was all he needed to make the first oasis. He had seen the smudge of timber lift over the skyline as one sights landfall at sea. He rode in among the scrub to the depression where ti-tree and paper-barks and reeds united to screen a water-hole from the day-long sun. But when Frazer went to fill his water-bags by starlight all he found was a muddy and mosquito-infested pool. His horse drank the lukewarm liquid, but Frazer hesitated to fill his water-bags. He had drunk worse water, but he had been thirstier then.

The meager supply in the water-hole puzzled him and angered him. He walked round the water-hole, striking matches in the dark and looking for tracks. Then he knew that an Afghan camel train had camped at the oasis, and the camels had raided the water. What little remained now since his horse had drunk would evaporate under another day's heat.

It was his bad luck that angered Frazer. For long nobody had used the water-hole. When some cattlemen had tried to make use of a tract of country to the south, it had been a halting place, but when the cattle went the oasis had been in no direct line of travel. It was even out of the way of the Afghan camel trains. Yet, just when Frazer could make use of the water-hole himself, Afghans had come with their camels and almost turned the place into a death-trap. The thing could not have happened to any man who was not unlucky. Frazer was unlucky, and he was at war with fate.

But he set to thinking of the other oasis and his bitterness left him. His horse had drunk, and that was the main thing. His horse would take him to the next oasis, and there he would surely find water. Not even his luck could be so bad that the other oasis would fail him. A stray camel train might camp here, but unless it was traveling east it would not camp at the next oasis. And no camel trains ever did travel east this way now. There was a better route to the south. All who would ever go to that second oasis would be a stray prospector, and no one would go there in years except he was a fool, for all round in a wide radius the country had been prospected and found barren.

All this had been reasoned out by Frazer before. It was reasoned out back when he took off his hat to the devil. He had seen everything in detail. And though he had not counted on the water-hole being nearly empty at the first oasis, it was not going to upset his plans. Most likely he argued that nothing could upset his plans save another oasis that failed to fulfil its promise.

THE next one nearly did fail. The camel train had done the unbelievable and gone east, and that was plain. But it was also plain that there was still a lot of water left. The desert-hardened camels had not had time to grow thirsty in that two-day journey across the sand; and there was water enough to last a man and his horse a fortnight or more. And Frazer was not going to stay at the oasis that long.

So he was less at war with fate, and it seemed even that for the nonce fate was kind. The last dry stage had been hard and Frazer had arrived on foot leading a horse that could scarce carry his pack, but it mattered little if his horse died now. In fact, when it sagged and fell to the sand, Frazer pressed the muzzle of his rifle against its forehead and shot it. A horse sickened and fevered by bad water was no good to him, whereas a horse that was sleek and fresh through a long sojourn by green reeds and swamp grass and good water was a better proposition altogether.

This horse had figured in Frazer's plans, but if fate had not been kind this once it might not have been there waiting for him. Blacks might have taken it from the oasis or it might have run across some poison-weed. But here it was, just as it had been left when they found Burton.

Frazer had been one of the party that had come across Burton by the water-hole with a black's spear in his side. It was back in the time when men had still prospected in this direction and when the oasis had been on the route to the now abandoned cattle lands. They had buried him in the scrub and let his horse go free, and because of the sand wastes hemming it in it had stayed to feed round the water-hole. Men who had faced loneliness all their lives and knew the sting of it had said it would not be so lonesome for Burton with his horse around. And this piece of sentiment worked out well for Frazer.

He would wait a day or two round the oasis and then push east to the timber strip, and thence leisurely south, and thence leisurely west. And in a few months he would have that money in a bank and be shut of the desert for all time. As for the girl at Conyer's Drift—well, other girls seemed just as good to Frazer's way of thinking.

He built a fire and made his tea and baked damper. He had run out of meat and could get no more till he struck the timber strip and could take a shot at a kangaroo. But he had a couple of ration-sacks of flour and a few canned beans and tea and sugar; and though the diet was tedious it would serve till he had crossed the last strip of desert. And he had plenty of tobacco.

He smoked as he lay on his blanket. He had let his fire go out, for as he was camped well away from the water-hole he scarce needed its smoke to ward away mosquitoes. The night was warm and still, and the only sound Frazer heard was the occasional croak of a frog. Burton's horse was feeding off round the edge of the oasis somewhere, but Frazer knew the desert checked extensive roamings as well as any fence.

Knocking the ash out of his pipe Frazer

turned on his side and sighed like a man freed of a burden. Tonight he had no worries and could sleep soundly. And as he was weary his sleep was very sound.

THERE was revelry at Conyer's Drift. There had been revelry ever since Williams had come in from the desert with his gold. He had never had so much wealth before, and he felt his sudden affluence should be celebrated. Every night there had been drink and gambling and loquacity at the hotel. But neither Williams' desire to celebrate nor his wealth seemed to diminish. The settlement that crouched like a nervous animal in the parched bush was passing through the most hectic time in its history.

Then one night a hollow-cheeked man rode in from the desert on an unsaddled horse. The horse he let free in the street when he dismounted before the hotel. The light in the bar showed him to be young, though he looked older than his years because of what the desert had done to him. His clothes were in shreds and he was sweat-marked and dusty. He looked as though he had just come through a forest fire.

"Hullo!" whistled the fat Irish publican. "Here's Joe Davis. What's been happening to you, Joe?"

They drank him and fed him and nursed good cheer back into his heart. In the room adjoining the bar where cards littered tables and men sat back in their chairs to listen, Davis explained:

"I was just about all in when I found the horse. The old camel cleared out one day and left me to make through on foot. I had a good bit of water, but it went before I got a sight of timber. I just about crawled in to that oasis where Burton was buried. It was dark and I drank till I nearly busted, and then I thought I'd lie there and die because a man'd never get away from there on foot. And then I spotted old Burton's horse. Well, I just sat there and looked at that horse and laughed. And then I reckoned it wasn't any use getting hysterical and started in to slice junks out of my clothes to make a kind of bridle. Then I hopped aboard before day broke and headed here. And—well, that's all."

They admitted his luck. They slapped him on the back and gave him more drink and lent him money to gamble with, and then they settled down to take things up where they had dropped them. Only old man Jennings, a bearded prospector, gave the thing any more thought.

"I was just wondering," he said, "if there mightn't have been some one there at the water-hole with that horse. It seems a long time for Burton's horse to have stayed there without some blacks running off with it. You're sure it was Burton's horse?"

"Sure as anything," Davis said. "Didn't I sell it to him when it was a yearling, and I remember a little patch of white just behind its off-side ear. I'd never mistake that patch."

"Still," persisted Jennings, "there's a chance another horse might have that marking."

"I know the horse," Davis repeated doggedly.

"Anyway," said Jennings, "I reckon it might be as well to take a couple of camels and run out there and have a look. There'd be no harm done."

"Waste of time," some one else declared. "It's not likely anybody'd be out there unless he was somebody driven in for water, and you'd have been able to tell a horse that had carried a man in there even if you didn't see him himself. Besides, there's nobody missing. Everybody's in the Drift helping our new millionaire spend his money."

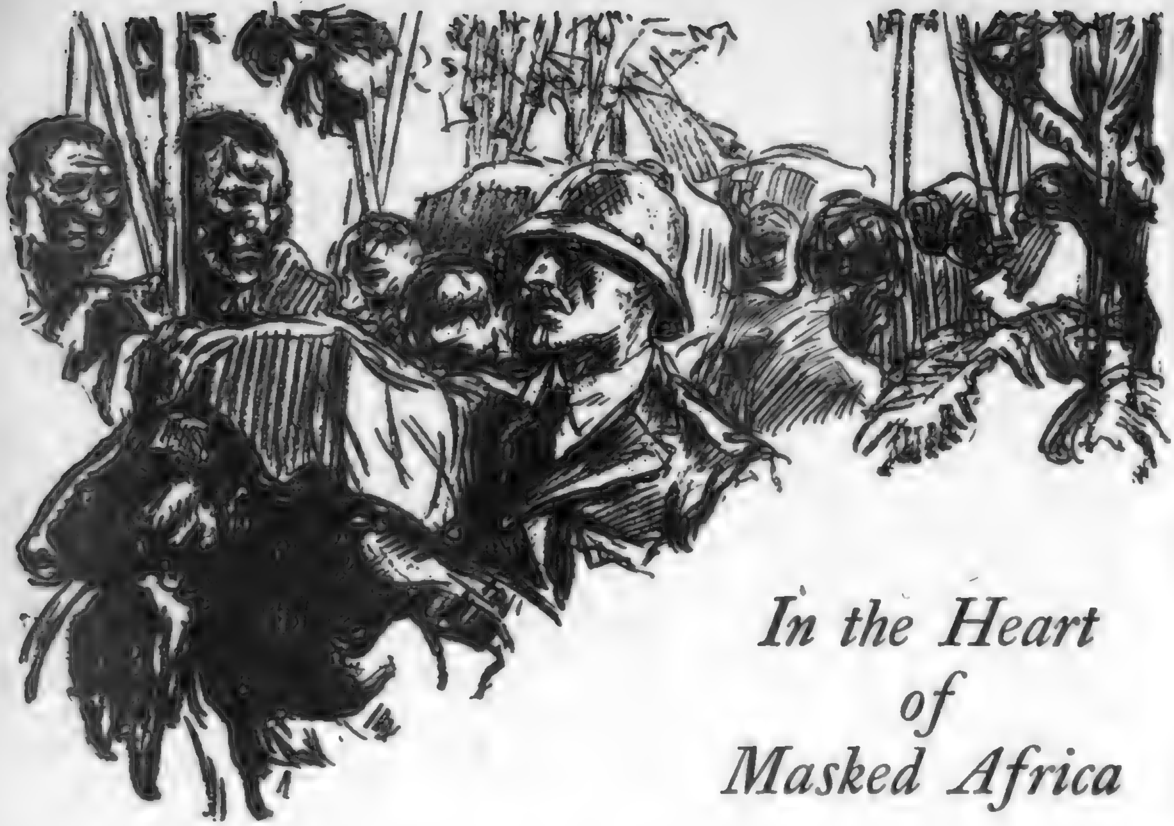
"There's Frazer not in," the publican stated. "He's about the only one who might have gone that way. He was always a queer cuss. If it's not him it's not likely to be anybody."

"If Frazer's not in the settlement," said Jennings, "I reckon that's where he is. Anyhow, we ought to start out tomorrow and have a look. Frazer couldn't make through on foot and he wouldn't have stores to last him long."

"Go on with the game," said Williams. "It's not Frazer."

"How do you know?" asked Jennings.

"Why," said Williams impatiently as he took up his cards, "I saw Frazer on his way down to Laverton. He told me himself that's where he was headed."



In the Heart of Masked Africa

"IVORY" McGINNIS suddenly found himself sitting bolt upright among his blankets, gripping his rifle, his every sense on the alert. He was not quite certain what had aroused him, but long experience with the lurking, ever-present dangers of the jungle had taught him to obey his instincts, and he felt rather than heard the cry of danger abroad in the night. Then, shattering the frightened stillness of the jungle, came the angry, barking roar of a leopard.

"Them damn cats ag'in," muttered the trader, dropping back to his blankets with a half-sigh.

"*Bwana, bwana!*" It was the whispering, scared voice of McGinnis' Kikuyu servant. "*N'kwesha pigga m'toto gombi.*"

Almost as if it were an echo to the Kikuyu's words there rang through the village a shrill scream of terror, its quavering cadences dying away in the depths of the illimitable jungles about the camp, leaving a distinct chill in the blood of its hearers.

"Calf—Hell!" exploded McGinnis, leaping to his feet and throwing aside the tent flap. "It's a kill an' 'twas a man—or a boy. Fetch a light."

The Kikuyu appeared almost instantly with a lighted acetylene lamp which carried a large reflector and which threw a brilliant glow over the village for a distance of thirty feet or more in front of them. On every side the grass huts were vomiting forth the terrified blacks who were all chattering with fear and making startled and incoherent inquiries of each other and of the white trader, but to them McGinnis paid not the slightest attention as he strode swiftly in the direction whence he knew the sounds had come.

Just beyond the edge of the village lay the jungle which marked the outposts of the Protectorate of British East Africa, an open jungle interspersed with wide and fertile veldts, but so infested with the starving, deadly leopards that even the most intrepid traveler entered the territory with a strong respect for the danger. Toward the vague outlines of the tangled forests McGinnis hurried, halting every few paces to assure himself that he was not running squarely into the brute. A pale, watery moon cast an indistinct sheen over the clustered mangoes, and the light from the incandescent lamp in the hands of the lagging native made the whitened boles of the trees stand out ghost-like in the vague shadows.

A Complete Novelette

Black Men and IVORY

By H. M. Sutherland

TWENTY yards from the edge of the forest McGinnis halted and motioned to the Kikuyu to come forward. Gingerly the boy advanced and at last drew abreast of his master. For several minutes both of them were engaged in seeking out the many possible coverts among the tall grasses in front. McGinnis, his ears attuned to the harsh, metallic sounds of the African nightbirds and insects, could hear no sound and had just about come to the conclusion that the cat had departed with its prey when a quick, sucking breath by the native, brought the trader about ready for a snap shot.

"There Master!" whispered the boy, pointing excitedly toward a bank of high grass over to the left several yards away. McGinnis, following the line indicated by the boy's shaking finger, located the phosphorescent glow of two small, luminous objects which he knew to be the baleful eyes of the crouching leopard.

Carefully he raised his double-barreled Bury to his shoulder and took a particular and painstaking aim. Holding one barrel for emergencies he let drive with the other at a point directly between the two glaring orbs. For an instant he believed that he had missed entirely, for look as he might, he could see nothing of the cat or hear a movement. It was just as if those two ghost eyes had completely vanished into the darkness.

He was on the point of advancing a few feet nearer when he heard a high, whining sigh—and then silence again.

"He is dead," cried the Kikuyu in joyous elation and the next instant was running swiftly in that direction.

"Careful!" cautioned McGinnis, guardedly following with his rifle in readiness for instant action, but the Kikuyu's reply was a gleeful shout which was echoed from half a hundred throats back in the village, and when McGinnis arrived the native had already plunged his long hunting knife to the hilt in the leopard's neck.

It was the finest specimen of that spotted jungle menace that the trader had ever seen, and for a moment he stared admiringly down upon the elongated, serpentine body so brilliantly colored, and wondered if, by any chance, there was a skilled curer of skins in the village. That pelt, if properly treated, would bring twenty pounds in Nairoba.

A QUICK stab of memory brought his attention back to the cat's victim whose cry had brought him there, and not ten feet away he made out the dark, huddled form of a native, half buried in the grass. Three strides brought him alongside and a single glance was sufficient to tell him that it was a native of some tribe other than the Kikuyus, and that he was unconscious, if not dead. McGinnis stooped and with experienced touch examined the man quickly, his fingers pausing in the region of the heart for a space of ten seconds. There was barely perceptible pulse, faint, but steady.

Calling the Kikuyu boy McGinnis caught the injured man by his shoulders, leaving the legs to the native, and the two of them hurried him to the trader's tent where they stretched him upon a blanket while a crowd of curious natives peered through the open flap and watched the proceedings with wide-eyed interest.

McGinnis, before his first aid work was under way, realized that the savage was dangerously, if not fatally, injured. His neck and back and one of his legs were deeply lacerated by the brute's long claws and the left shoulder had been crushed between its powerful jaws. Whether he had lost consciousness from the pain or the loss of blood there was no way of determining, but the white man lost no time in treating the wounds with an antiseptic and stopping the flow of blood.

From the raised scars—cicatrices—which formed curious designs on the chest, shoulders, and arms of the injured man, McGinnis recognized him as a member of one of the central African tribes inhabiting the Congo Basin, probably of the Mambala tribe with whom it was a custom—almost a religious rite—to undergo untold pain in order to obtain the hideous, but highly prized scars. Having lived with several of these tribes for months at a time while collecting ivory in that little known section south of Stanley Falls, McGinnis remembered them as the most primitive and having the most curious and bizarre customs of any people throughout mysterious and enigmatical Africa.

The victim's peculiar head-dress, several folds of cloth twisted in an unusual fashion, caught McGinnis' eye and he nodded in confirmation of his first conclusion, viz, that the man was a member of that hereditary class of Mambala tribesmen called the *muri*. There had always been a caste system in Mambalaland, a system which closely resembled that of India although not quite so complicated. The *muri* were a sort of an intermediate class between the chief and his family and the ordinary freemen. In addition to these classes there were slaves, usually the property of the chief and the *muri*.

These *muri*, according to immemorial custom, wore a special head-covering of cloth which could not be removed by any one, under penalty of death. There was something else—a peculiar ruling which governed the tribe as regards the *muri*—which had struck McGinnis as being both absurd and unparalleled. What was it?—Yes, the iron bracelet! He lifted the *muri's* arm and studied the smooth circlet thoughtfully. How did this Mambala law go? The bracelet passes at death to the nephew (sister's son) and the heir must steal the skull of his uncle and paint it red; then he must hang it in his lodge and after that he is entitled to a part of each animal killed by the hunters, and is permitted to eat kola nuts. There were a lot of customs and laws among the Mambalas and their neighbors which had brought disgust and horror even to McGinnis who had long since been hardened to them, and chief of these was undisguised cannibalism. But the *muri*, singularly enough, were the only members of the Mambala tribe, except the women, who did not practice this custom.

The *muri* was a young man, apparently somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-five, and he bore the appearance of having attained a higher degree of intelligence than the typical Mambalan. He was well built, muscular and having the narrow hips and broad shoulders of the athlete, indicating an unusual endurance and strength. Under the ministrations of the trader, he showed signs of returning consciousness, but McGinnis forced him to take a sleeping powder and then, himself, turned in for the night.

The injured youth was babbling incoherently, seemingly in a delirium and for several minutes McGinnis lay listening, trying to follow the words although his knowledge of the Mambala dialect was limited.

"*Bwana* Vipero! *Bwana* Vipero!" These words the native repeated time and again, and always in a frightened, pleading tone.

That name, Vipero, had a vaguely familiar sound and McGinnis sought to place it.

Quite suddenly he remembered. The Vipero brothers were a pair of Portuguese ivory traders who had made a fortune in the Congo with headquarters at Boma near the mouth of the river. Again McGinnis turned his attention to the *muri* and this time he caught a whispered word which brought him to a sitting posture, tense and immobile.

"The death-field of the elephant," would have been a literal translation of the *muri's* words—the dream of every ivory hunter in the Congo, the El Dorado of the trader, the death retreat of the elephant for a thousand years, a carpet of the gleaming polished tusks!

CHAPTER II

ONE of the most mysterious, and perhaps the most inexplicable, of the strange phenomena of the heart of masked Africa—the Congo—is that unerring instinct of the elephant which when the clutch of death grips him leads him to some secluded spot untraveled by the feet of man, there to die unseen, his bones—and tusks—to remain forever hidden from the eye of man. This infallible instinct McGinnis had always considered a myth, merely the exaggerated interpretation of some tribal superstition, until he had spent a few years in that country, and at last he was forced to the conclusion that the myth was based on fact. Along the some thousands of miles he had traveled he had yet to discover his first elephant skeleton, although the bones of every other family of big game were every day discoveries.

That there was some secret hiding place—several places of a necessity—where these almost innumerable herds returned singly to pass their last moments in solitude, McGinnis did not for an instant doubt. Perhaps it was the same instinct which drove the great schools of salmon to the little fresh water creek where they were born to spawn and die, surmounting almost any obstacle to accomplish that end. Anyway he had spent months trailing rumor and searching for this boneyard of the ages because he knew that a fortune was to be had there for the taking, but the mystery, as far as he was concerned, was as inexplicable now as it had been when he first plunged into the jungle eight years earlier. Nevertheless, the mere mention of the myth always quickened his blood, and accentuated the old urge to follow the dank trails on that will-o-the-wisp fantasy.

And what did this *muri* know of the "death-field of the elephant," and what connection with this did the Portuguese trader, Vipero, have? True, Vipero knew as much about the jungles of the Congo as any living man, and it was also a known fact that the Vipero Brothers had reaped an immense fortune in the ivory business during the last two years. Monthly, according to common report, Carlos Vipero brought into Boma, by boat, many hundredweight of ivory, some of the pieces being record-breaking in weight and perfect condition. He was known as an indomitable and unscrupulous trader, but it was hardly possible, even with those qualifications, to accomplish what he was doing with monotonous regularity.

Also what relations could there be between this savage *muri* and the Portuguese trader? Why was the black youth showing such a subconscious fear of Vipero that he begged and pleaded with him even in his delirium? And why had the youth fled so far from his native haunts along the Kwilu River? These questions McGinnis pondered through the night and dawn found him no closer to an explanation than he was at the beginning.

UPON arising his first consideration was for the injured black, and an examination assured him that the man was resting comfortably and that, unless the dread gangrene set up, he would have a fair chance of recovery. While supervising the preparation of his own breakfast, he ordered the Kikuyu to make a bowl of broth and when he carried it into the tent he found that the *muri* was awake. At McGinnis' appearance the patient cringed back beneath the folds of his blanket, and over his face spread an expression of utter fear.

"What is it that you fear, *Muri?*" demanded McGinnis in the Mambala dialect, bending over the cowering form. "I am your friend."

At his words the *muri* removed his hand from before his eyes and gazed at the white man wonderingly, his face gradually assuming an expression of relief and confidence. Yet he was plainly bewildered, seeking to understand what had occurred to bring him into his new and strange surroundings. Evidently his memory flashed back to the attack for his glance flew toward the open flap and again fear haunted his eyes.

"Master Vipero's leopard!" he gasped. "It was there!" He pointed down the street of the village.

"The cat is dead, *Muri*, so you have no cause for fear. Drink this," he ordered placing the bowl in reach of the Mombalan's uninjured hand. "Afterward we will speak of Vipero, but you must trust me. I will protect you."

"But *Bwana* Vipero will take me—he is here."

"Here?" McGinnis glanced toward the flap, half expecting to see the Portuguese trader, and then he smiled reassuringly at the *muri*. "Drink the broth—you are safe from Vipero."

The youth obeyed, but his fingers were trembling as he raised the bowl to his lips. It was evident that he stood in a deep-rooted fear of the Portuguese trader, and that he had been fleeing from him for life, but the reference to Vipero's leopard—that was rot, or the vagaries of a fever-crazed mind. The leopard was real enough and vicious enough to preclude any possibility of it having been tamed.

When the Mombalan had finished his broth, McGinnis sat down beside him and finally convinced him that he had reached a safe haven, and that Vipero was not coming for him—at least that he (McGinnis) would not give him over to the Portuguese even if the latter demanded it. Gradually and by piecing together the incoherencies McGinnis drew from the youth a strange and almost unbelievable story of superstition and cruelty and ruthlessness which could only have happened in the inscrutable, primitive Congo, where matter rules and the hollow emptiness of the world's soul is a mocking certainty.

IN MOMBALALAND, south of Stanley Falls, the *muri* had lived with his tribe under the wise supervision of the chief, Moto Zop, one of the most wealthy chieftains in the Kwilu Basin. Into the village a little more than two years previously had come a white trader—*Bwana* Vipero—who was seeking the highly prized ivory. Through a powerful *kissi* (medicine) he had made the chief, Moto Zop, divulge the secret of his tribe—the source of revenue which had made the chief rich—which was that "death-field of the elephants."

Moreover, Vipero had let it be known that he was a special emissary of the Death Spirit, or *Moloki* as this spirit is called in Mombalaland, and that death would be the reward of any one who dared violate the rules and laws which Vipero saw fit to lay down. McGinnis, having full knowledge of the weird superstitions and gullibility of the average tribesmen of Mombaland, readily realized how easily Vipero was able to accomplish this hoax on the credulous natives, for they seemed to believe anything that is told them, to have an ineffable faith in the white man and his ability to perform miracles.

In complete control of the vast ivory field, he ruled Mombalaland with an iron hand while Moto Zop seemed contented with a share of the profits and offered to take no part in the administration of his powers and laws. Vipero, according to the *muri's* tale, seemed not only to have complete power over the natives, but appeared to hold dominion over the wild beasts of the jungle as well. Certain it was that he was followed wherever he went by that same leopard which had finally brought the *muri* down, and it seemed to divine his wishes and obey his orders. This alone had placed the Portuguese among the gods, as far as Mombalaland was concerned, and they acted accordingly.

So powerful was his influence over the tribe that its members verily believed that he was aware of everything that had taken place while he was absent on a trip with the ivory to Boma, and when he had returned less than a month previously, he had accused the *muri* of having robbed the ivory field of twenty choice tusks while he was away. From what McGinnis was able to gather, it appeared that the *muri* had bought a rifle from an itinerant trader, and the price of the rifle was twenty tusks. These the youth had taken from the hidden field without any thought of theft, since the ivory had been the property of his tribe so long. Before Vipero came among them Moto Zop had permitted the *muri* and his ilk to take ivory from the field as they saw fit, and the *muri* gathered twenty choice pieces and the exchange was made.

Although the *muri* half believed that Vipero knew of the transaction through some sort of spiritual communication, McGinnis surmised that the Portuguese had met this itinerant trader on the way out of the jungleland, and had obtained the details of the business first hand. However that may have been, Vipero, as soon as he arrived, called the tribe together and accused the *muri* of theft, a flagrant violation to ruling of the white man, and a direct insult to the *Moloki*. He predicted dire and dreadful calamities unless the *muri* paid the extreme penalty, and this the gullible Mombalans swallowed.

Determined to make an example of the *muri* Vipero devised one of the most cruel and blood-curdling devices that the mind of man ever planned, one which would remain indelibly impressed in the minds of the Mombalans and so prevent another theft from the ivory field. As has been stated previously Vipero possessed a leopard which he had trained to do his bidding, and the punishment to the *muri* was, according to his plan, to be inflicted by the cat in the following manner:

THE *muri* was bound with the thongs of dried cowhide so that he was able to move only with the greatest exertion, and then he was fastened to a stake driven deep into the ground. Around his body ran two loops of a heavy rope made from the fibers of the boabab tree, and the other end of the rope was fastened securely to the stake. The distance from the stake to his body was approximately six feet.

Then Vipero brought out his leopard and fastened a heavy collar around its neck. To this collar he then tied a heavy rawhide thong and secured the other end of the leash to the stake, in such a manner that the cat and its victim, each straining at his bonds, were separated by a bare three inches. The leopard, by stretching out on the ground and reaching forward with his long, hooked claws, could almost touch the *muri's* shoulder, and for the first hour after the ordeal began, the beast's efforts to get to its prey were ceaseless. At last, tiring, it lay down and fixed its eyes upon the youth, apparently waiting for him to relax his vigilance for an instant and sag backward far enough to bring him within reach.

But a deeper significance lay beneath the surface of the punishment. The device had been prepared with a devilish cunning which multiplied the physical torture by a mental anxiety a thousand times more poignant. Vipero knew that the *muri* and every Mombalan present was aware of that peculiar characteristic of the boabab rope which caused it to shrink when dampened by the dew and fogs which came in with the night. Also it was common knowledge that rawhide possessed the opposite characteristic and would stretch several inches when wet.

The agonies which constricted the heart of the *muri* when the pall of night curtained off everything but the opalescent glare in the eyes of the crouching nemesis less than two feet away must be left to the imagination. The awestruck natives retired to their huts and no power could have routed them out while an angry *Moloki* was waiting for his sacrifice. From somewhere far off in the darkness came the deep roar of a hungry lion which immediately silenced every other sound of the night. A cool breeze drifted in from the river, bringing with it a dank fog which moistened the impassive face of the victim who was stoically resigned so his fate.

A low growl from the cat caused him to open his eyes, and almost over him he saw a dark form loom. For an instant he thought it was the leopard and that the end had come. But no! A knife blade was slipped under the rope, and a moment later he rolled out of reach of the great claws. Painfully he arose to his feet, and his cramped legs almost buckled under him. His rescuer leaned toward him and, slipping the knife into his hands, whispered one word.

"Go!"

He recognized her as a girl of the village upon whom he had looked with favor and whom he knew to be the daughter of one of his own caste. He knelt at her feet as an expression of his gratitude and, without taking time to secure even his rifle or food for his journey, he plunged into the jungle and headed eastward with all possible haste.

IT WAS not until late in the afternoon of the second day that he realized that he was being followed, trailed by the great leopard who followed the fugitive's tracks as unerringly as a trained bloodhound. But the cat was held in check by Vipero who was accompanied by two of his followers, men of the Kasai tribe farther down the Congo. All this the *muri* saw from the top of a small eminence and the discovery lent speed to his flight, but no matter how rapid his progress, the trailers seemed to maintain the pace, never being more than a few hundred yards in the rear. For three nights the *muri* traveled all night, and the pursuers apparently did the same, but on the third night he somehow sensed the fact that he was not being pursued. Climbing to the top of a high cabbage palm he studied the landscape behind him and at last located the light of a small fire. That night he slept for a few hours in a clump of high grass.

Living on mangoes and such fruit and nuts as he was able to snatch up in his flight he managed to live, but his efforts were growing weaker and weaker, until it seemed that, as the days passed, there was nothing to do but lie down and wait for the pursuers to come and do with him as they willed. But always the fear of that leopard drove him on, and it was on the evening of the twentieth day that he reached the Kikuyu village. While crawling through the grass, watching the huts in an effort to see what people lived there, the leopard had leaped upon him—just when the goal was reached.

Such was the story the *muri* babbled to McGinnis, and the latter heard him through without interruption, although he found it hard to resist interrupting in order to ascertain the truth about the elephant death-field. He was on the point of asking the youth to describe this ivory deposit—for it could hardly be called anything else—when a shadow crossed the tent flap and an instant later a white man stood outlined against the bright sunshine in the opening. Although he had never seen the man McGinnis instantly recognized him as Carlos Vipero.

CHAPTER III

"COME in, Señor Vipero!" invited McGinnis affably. "I have been expectin' you."

Vipero smiled and nodded easily as he stepped through and advanced toward a chair. His keen questioning glance seemed to be centered on McGinnis, but the latter knew that nothing in the tent escaped his quick scrutiny, yet there was nothing in his actions to betray his interest in the injured man at the rear.

The Portuguese ivory trader was a heavy set, swarthy man, rather below the average in height, but with an abnormal breadth of shoulders and the longest arms McGinnis had ever seen, reaching to the man's knees. A sort of a curbed, fierce virility seemed to keep him restless and there was rarely an instant when some part of his body was not moving. His gleaming, ebony eyes seemed forever searching for something, but never finding it.

He accepted the cigar McGinnis offered him and, in giving his thanks, he exposed a row of large, firm, albeit yellow, teeth.

"Meestaire McGeenes," he declared softly, "eet ees a pleasyure to meet you. I have often heard of you on ze trail een ze jungle. Eet ees not necessaire to make you acquaint' weeth me—you know ze name, Vipero, eet seems." Despite his efforts at self control, he seemed unable to keep from shooting a malignant glance at the injured *muri*.

"The *muri* told me you were coming—for him." McGinnis' instant dislike of the man caused him to forget his hospitable attitude, and to face the situation bluntly.

"Ah!" Vipero's bland smile was immediately lost in a mask of malice and hate that caused McGinnis' hand to drop to his automatic in a hip-holster.

"He also told me that I killed your pet leopard," continued McGinnis in an even tone. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"That, señor," returned Vipero, recovering his suavity, "could not be helped. I do not hold anger for you. You could not know that he wass trailing ze murderer."

"Murderer?"

"But yes. Ze *muri* keel ze chief of Mombalaland—Moto Zop. He cut ze throat." He made an eloquent gesture with his finger, running it around his neck from ear to ear. "I but seek to breng heem back to justice."

"So!"

On the instant McGinnis decided to pretend to believe Vipero and to make him think that the *muri* had not exposed the truth of the matter. To let the latter know that he knew of the ivory cache would be a warning and would lessen his chances of winning to the vanishing point. There could be only one way to compete with Vipero, and that by cunning and trickery.

"We weel wait six day," returned Vipero after an instant's hesitation. "He be strong to be carry in wan week, sure."

McGinnis shook his head negatively. "Nor two weeks, señor." He knew that Vipero's two men would probably carry the *muri* a mile—to some point where the jungle was dense and offered secure hiding places. "I promise you, Vipero, that I shall bring him to the Kwilu in one month," he continued, "or earlier if he recovers quickly."

"We could not theenk to ask the señor to make soch a—how you say?—sacrifeece," declared Vipero, spreading his hands and shrugging expressively. At the same time his eyes narrowed to slits and his thin lips straightened grimly as if he divined the purpose of the other.

"But I have been planning a trip to the Kwilu Basin for some time," explained McGinnis, thoroughly enjoying the byplay. "It will be no trouble at all."

"Eet ees not best, señor," said Vipero in a tone that was plainly a threat. "Moch sleeping seekness keels hondreds, an' ze tsetse bug 'ave keel ze cattle—no food—notting. Ze Mombala plan to mak war on ze Basoko mebbe thees month. No good to come to ze upper Congo, señor."

"Nevertheless in one month I shall be there," persisted McGinnis with a smile.

For an instant Vipero's anger overcome his urbanity, and his eyes blazed with hate and venom.

"At your own risk, señor," he said with an ironic bow, and then wheeled and disappeared through the opening.

THE livid passion which had suffused Vipero's face when the interview was closed told McGinnis that it was war to the hilt between them, and that he could expect no quarter if he ever fell into the hands of the Portuguese. That he was a power on the Congo and Kwilu with several thousand Ngombe warriors to do his bidding there could be no doubt, and McGinnis knew that merely to march into the country at the head of a string of porters would be worse than suicide. Wherefore he realized that a successful visit to the elephant death-field would necessitate careful and minute planning and an arduous courtship of the fickle Goddess of Luck.

Already a nebulous idea was taking form in his mind, and retiring to the shade of a grove of cabbage palms a few yards from the tent, he gave himself over to deep and detailed thought. For several hours he was so immersed in his reverie that he was only half aware of the incidents which took place before his eyes, chief of which was the departure of Vipero and his two followers. Finally the smell of cooking food assailed his nostrils, and he arose and entered the tent.

The *muri* was sleeping comfortably despite the intense heat, and, after adjusting the mosquito bar, he slipped outside again. Two hours later he suddenly gave the orders to break camp, and with the precision of long practice the string of twenty porters fell in and were ready for the start in thirty minutes. The *muri* was placed on a canopied stretcher carried by four of the porters, and at a word from McGinnis they swung out along the eastern trail in the direction of Entebba.

Two days later they reached Entebba as the morning sun was scattering the mists from Lake Victoria Nyanza, and McGinnis lost no time in getting the *muri* into an English hospital for the injured man had suffered from the hardships of the trip and was carrying a high temperature. Giving his men a holiday until he returned McGinnis journeyed first to Nairoba where he spent three days in futile search of that which he felt was essential for the success of his foray into the Congo. Unaffected by this first setback, he caught the Uganda train for Mombassa on the coast, traveling all day and all night until nine o'clock the following morning in a stuffy compartment, and with a sigh of relief he went to a hotel and had a real bath and a shave.

It was down on the water front that night, on an ill-lighted street lined with cadaverous warehouses, that he came to the end of his search. Across the front of a cheap, garish theater was emblazoned in huge, red letters the following legend:

LAL SHIKOR
THE GREAT HINDOO WIZARD

PAYING his two shillings McGinnis entered and took a seat in a secluded stall where for the next hour he witnessed sleight-of-hand and feats of magic rather above the ordinary performance which included the basket-sword trick and the disappearing girl. One of the Hindoo's most mysterious performances was the plucking of dozens of eggs from the clothing of two of his "victims" during which Lal's loosely hanging sleeves were looped back over his shoulders.

The magician was apparently a young man, wiry and slender, and a single glance was sufficient for McGinnis to see that he was not an Oriental, but an Anglo-Saxon with a clever disguise. A close scrutiny showed that at the edge of the turban was a fringe of blond hair, and that his arms were not the color of his face, but a healthy, clear pink. Smiling with satisfaction McGinnis waited for the performance to end, seeing little of the action on the stage, and giving his entire attention to the business before him.

When the curtain was rung down he arose and made his way behind the scenes where, in a dirty, ill-smelling dressing-room, he found Lal Shikor divesting himself of his flowing Hindoo robe. He halted, ceremoniously placed a chair before his visitor, and proffered him a cigaret.

"What does the *sahib* desire?" he purred politely.

"Brass tacks!" replied McGinnis with a grin. "If you're a Hindoo, then I'm a Hottentot."

Lal smiled sardonically. "I've seen some Hottentots I could trust farther than I can some white men I've met."

"I'm Ivory McGinnis—."

"Oh! That's different. I've heard of you." He tossed the turban to the table. "My name's Smith."

"'Twill do," replied McGinnis offering his hand which the other grasped heartily.

"I'm not kiddin', McGinnis," he declared, dropping to another seat. "I started out under that name, but I've seen fit to change it from time to time—according to the business I happened to be engaged in. You'll have to admit that a man named Smith would not be a howling success as a magician, wouldn't you?"

"Something in that, I imagine," agreed McGinnis, "but I came to ask you one question. Do you want to make twenty or thirty thousand pounds?"

Smith stared at his visitor for a full minute, and then a cynical smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"Murder only costs twenty pounds in Mombassa," he replied softly.

"It may amount to that," laughed McGinnis, "but the odds are in favor of a massacre. Still there's a hundred thousand pounds—perhaps several times that amount to be had if luck is with us. Otherwise—." He shrugged, and left the sentence unfinished.

"It can't be done," declared Smith shaking his head solemnly.

"What?"

"A raid on the Kimberly Diamond offices."

"This is an open, legitimate proposition, Smith," said McGinnis earnestly. "It's a long shot—the two of us pitted against two thousand Ngombe warriors in the Congo with a devil incarnate by the name of Vipero thrown in for good measure on their side. If we win we're rich, but if we lose—well, we'll be where disappointment won't hurt. It's easier than it looks. Those Mombalans are a superstitious lot, and as the future God of the Congo, I'm offerin' to you my congratulations."

"I knew it!" ejaculated Smith. "When did you get out of the psychopathic ward?"

"Take it or leave it," countered McGinnis.

Smith arose and, assuming a pleading, suppliant attitude, made a number of weird, cabalistic signs.

"Who's balmy now?" asked McGinnis quizzically.

"Merely votive supplications to the Goddess of Chance, and I think she has done an about-face. You've hired Aristide Roosevelt Smith of Toledo, Ohio, U. S. A."

"'Tis an unusual name," quoth McGinnis.

"Yes," drawled Smith, "my mother was a school teacher and my father a cop."

CHAPTER IV

WITH Smith's paraphernalia aboard they took the Uganda train and three days later arrived in Entebbe. After supervising the removal of their many pieces of baggage to McGinnis' headquarters, their next move was to visit the hospital where they found that the *muri* was making a swift recovery. He was beginning to hobble about, although the process was exceedingly painful, and the hospital authorities declared that in three days they would discharge him.

This time was fully occupied by McGinnis and Smith in rounding up the latter's score of celebrating porters and adding thirty additional men to the troop. In the selection of these McGinnis paid particular attention to whatever evidences of courage and endurance they seemed to exhibit.

Several of the number were ex-members of the red-cap constabulary whose nerve had been tried under fire, and through them McGinnis was able to secure others whom he knew would stand with him under trying difficulties.

On the day that the *muri* was permitted to leave the hospital, McGinnis sent up four of his men from the temporary camp, but the Mombalan scorned their aid and managed to make the distance, a mere quarter of a mile, without greatly exerting himself. McGinnis led him and Smith into his tent and ordered that they be left in strict seclusion for the next hour.

"You don't know the Mombalan tongue, do you, Smith?" queried McGinnis as he closed the flap.

"I'm taking your word that there is such a thing," replied the other as he reclined at full length upon a cot.

"I'm going to get some definite facts from this youth, and I'll translate what he says later," promised McGinnis. "But first I'm going to give you a few facts to chew over while I'm questioning him. This fortune we're going after is an ivory mine—."

"Do you mine the stuff? I was always under the impression—"

"Listen!" cut in McGinnis. "If you've been in Africa long you've heard of the myth of the elephant burying grounds—the hidden cemeteries of several thousand years. You can pick the ivory off the ground or dig it up as you choose."

"I've heard of that," nodded Smith with the light of understanding in his eyes.

"This boy," went on McGinnis, "knows where one of these cemeteries is located. I've saved his life, and the Mombalans are a grateful lot—fidelity, loyalty and all that. Now I'm going to ask this lad where the ivory can be found and if he will lead us to it."

FOR the next quarter of an hour McGinnis and the *muri* were in uninterrupted conversation, the *muri* doing most of the talking with McGinnis occasionally interjecting a question. At last McGinnis nodded and turned to Smith.

"Couldn't be sweeter," he said with a chuckle. "The ivory's there, and all that is between us and it is a few hundred miles of dangerous jungle and between two and three thousand Ngombe warriors, sudden death and a few other little difficulties like that."

Smith waved his hand airily. "Poof—likewise piffle—not to mention fiddlesticks! So that carbon copy of Beelzebub," pointing to the *muri*, "has stood upon the pre-historic spot, eh?"

"So he says, and I'll take oath it's true—every word of it. Here's what he has to say—a free translation. 'A day's journey to the south of his village on the Kwilu River arises the Smoking mountains,' which, by the way, I've seen and they are always shrouded in smoke or mist. 'One hour from the foothills the traveler, if he will follow certain mysterious signs, will reach the crest of a range of hills which completely encircle a small valley which is more than an hour's walk from one side to the other.' Sounds like the crater of an extinct volcano some three or four miles in diameter.

"'Across this ridge leads dozens of small paths, worn deep by the passing feet of the weakening elephants throughout the ages. But not one of the great beasts has ever died before crossing the hill while the inside slope is literally carpeted with bones, some of them lying only a few yards below the crest. Down in the valley, in the dense cane-breaks and creepers, the great tusks gleam white as far as the eye can reach. And the white man, a Portuguese trader about whom I believe I told you, has removed hundreds of pieces without visibly diminishing the supply.' That, is his story, and it is true to the veriest detail. The Mombalan is not given to lying for civilization has not yet reached him."

Smith smiled genially. "With that recommendation, I'm convinced. When do we start?"

"We'll give the *muri* three more days to get control of his legs," replied McGinnis.

"Let's have an idea of the part I'm to play in this little game," suggested Smith, deftly rolling a cigaret. "I think I know in a general way, but let's get down to cases."

"You have gone into this blindly, Smith, and—"

"Not blindly," interrupted Smith with a grin. "I made a few inquiries in Mombassa before we left."

"What did you discover?"

"That I wouldn't be making a mistake by throwing in with you."

McGinnis shrugged. "It's a square game, Smith, and we're splittin' the profits two ways. I'm quittin' this God-forgotten dump of putrid mishaps when we clean up this cache. Don't make a mistake about it, we can retire all right. But your part in the business boils down to this: I'm going to tell the Mombalans that you are in league with the *Moloki* which is about the only thing that will bluff the Ngombe. You will stage a few of your legerdemain tricks and it wouldn't be hard to convince the Mombalans that you are the *Moloki* devil himself. This Portuguese trader, Vipero, whom I think I have told you about, is no fool. He is in control because he has taken advantage of the superstitions of those people and knows that they will believe anything he tells them. But if we can't put him back in the amateur class, then we don't deserve to win."

Smith was silent for a long minute, immersed in thought. Then he chuckled.

"You know, McGinnis," he declared with a twinkle in his eye, "the whole damn thing sounds so silly and impossible that it ought to go through with ease. It's the impossible that happens in this country. There's only one drawback as far as I can see—unless these Mombala birds have theaters. You probably know that I require a few special arrangements such as trap-doors and screens."

"I had thought of that and I bought enough lumber for a small stage yesterday. You have three days to build one, and the boys will carry it piecemeal with them."

"Which gives me the unparalleled distinction," declared Smith impressively, "of being the only Thespian who ever carried a road show on the Cannibal Circuit."

CHAPTER V

THREE weeks later the party was encamped at the mouth of the Kwilu which point had been reached without incident other than the ordinary trials of the trail. The *muri* had exhibited exceptional recuperative powers, and a week out of Entebbe he showed no ill effects from his encounter with the leopard. Armed with one of McGinnis' rifles, he led the two white men along unmarked trails with that characteristic peculiar to some of the central African tribesmen which is called *chumfo* and which seems to be a sort of a sixth sense which leads them with unerring accuracy to their destination.

On reaching the Kwilu it was decided to make the remainder of the journey by boat and, accordingly, a halt was called to give the natives time to make two forty-foot dugouts. The trees were felled and, between hewing and burning, only two days were necessary to make the boats safe and easily steered. Into these two dug-outs the supplies and Smith's paraphernalia were packed and the porters were converted into oarsmen. Thirty miles up the river they discovered that a laborious portage was necessary around some dangerous rapids, and feeling certain that Vipero had not learned of their approach, McGinnis ordered a halt for the afternoon and night. It was only five miles, according to the *muri*, to Moto Zop's village and Vipero's jungle headquarters, and McGinnis felt that perhaps it would be better to arrive early in the morning rather than late in the afternoon.

Smith had proved a diverting travel-companion, not only to McGinnis but to the troop of porters as well. To amuse himself he had often performed various little sleight-of-hand tricks on the natives around the camp fires at night, usually a disappearing coin, or removing some strange object from some even more strange hiding place, and it was not long before the Kikuyu men began to eye him askance and to move away from him whenever he drew near. McGinnis at last cautioned him to be careful about those tricks else the entire crew would be deserting them through superstitious terror. Despite this, by the time they had reached the Kwilu, they were firmly convinced that Ju-Ju, as they called him for some unknown reason, was none other than the devil himself. Upon questioning them McGinnis learned that Ju-Ju was the name they had given to the Biblical devil of whom the missionaries had told them.

Knowing that there was enough similarity between the Mombalan and Kikuyu dialects to permit them to understand each other, McGinnis deemed it unwise to disillusion them, but he did promise them faithfully that he would not permit Ju-Ju to injure them in any manner and they appeared to place utter confidence in this promise.

The sun was peeping over the low range of volcanic hills to the east when McGinnis and his party drove the dug-outs to the shore above which nestled Moto Zop's straggling village. Apparently the party was expected for it seemed that every member of the village was waiting on the shore, curious but silent. McGinnis shot a swift glance over the crowd in search of Vipero, but the Portuguese was absent. One figure among the throng caught and held his attention—that of a large Mombalan, past middle age, whose greatest bid for distinction was his head-gear, an elaborate millinery creation of brightly colored feathers. Also his right arm seemed covered from his wrist to his elbow with dozens of bracelets.

Leaning toward the *muri* McGinnis pointed toward this gaily bedighted individual.

"Is that Moto Zop?" he asked.

"Yes, but I do not see *Bwana* Vipero," replied the *muri*.

McGinnis stepped ashore followed by Smith, and together they advanced toward the old chieftain. Smith squinted humorously at the old man's fantastic adornments.

"Is that His Majesty—the old bird with the young ideas?" he queried, indicating Moto Zop.

McGinnis nodded, smothering a smile, for Moto Zop's appearance was ludicrous. Save for his brilliant head-dress and bracelets he wore nothing but an abbreviated breech-clout.

"Now that," whispered Smith admiringly, "is what I call the last thing in style—short skirt an' ever'thing."

THE old chief greeted his visitors politely, received the presents McGinnis had brought, and grunted his thanks. These presents consisted of a string of imitation leopard teeth, a mother-of-pearl match-box and several brass bracelets. With another grunt he led the white men to his hut and under a canvas awning in front, seated upon skins, he served them with tepid, vinegary palm-wine.

With a wry face Smith lowered his baked-clay bowl.

"No wonder they're cannibals," he declared. "A man would do 'most anything to get that taste out of his mouth."

McGinnis with an effort finished his bowl and then gave his entire attention to the old chief. That the latter was not overjoyed at the arrival of the white men was quite evident in his actions, but there also seemed to be a wholesome fear in his heart of these strange devils from across the seas. He sat sipping his wine, engrossed in his thoughts, and McGinnis was able to read his face like a book. Vipero had warned him of the coming of the white man, and the old chieftain was not quite certain just what action he should take.

He was just about as unattractive a Ngombe as could be found on the Kwilu where not one could, by the widest stretch of imagination, be termed handsome. His face was a perfect network of cicatrices, the scars running in parallel lines above his eyes and crisscrossing on his cheeks and nose. In addition his wide, thick-lipped mouth was surrounded by a row of smaller scars, while his body was seamed and fretted by similar designs. In all the man must have spent months of the most intense agony to obtain this desired Adonis effect.

The *muri* approached and threw himself prone on the ground at McGinnis' side. In a tone so low that Moto Zop could not hear he informed McGinnis that Vipero had four days ago gone to the ivory field with a hundred porters to bring out a shipment and that he had been expected to return the preceding night. Undoubtedly he would put in his appearance by noon.

WITH Moto Zop's permission, McGinnis put his men to work establishing his camp, and within an hour the two tents, and huts for the porters, were ready for occupancy.

Under Smith's directions twenty men were engaged in raising a pole platform six feet off the ground upon which the canopied stage was to be placed. The space from the platform to the ground was walled with reeds forming a small room under the stage in which Smith stored his paraphernalia. While they were securing the uprights for the canvas roof over the stage, a great shouting and barking of mangy dogs announced the arrival of Vipero and his ivory hunters.

With undisguised interest, McGinnis watched the approach of the long caravan, each laden bearer singing a weird, rhythmic chant. A small fortune in ivory gleamed in sharp contrast among those dark sweating bodies, two men being necessary to each huge tusk. Never in all his years on the Congo had McGinnis seen anything to equal the specimens which Vipero was bringing in, for he evidently was selecting only the choice pieces from the vast cache.

The Portuguese, if he was surprised to see McGinnis, gave no indication of it. After overseeing the disposal of the ivory he came forward and offered McGinnis his hand.

"Eet ees a pleasyure, señor," he said pleasantly. "I deed not theenk you would come."

"I usually keep my promises, Vipero," replied McGinnis. "By the way, meet my friend, Ju-Ju, sometimes called the devil."

Vipero shook the proferred hand silently, but his eyes narrowed perceptibly as if he was trying to fathom McGinnis' purpose, then he smiled blandly.

"You do not 'ave ze appearance, señor," he said to Smith, "but I am honored."

The mocking smile angered Smith.

"I wish I could return the compliment, señor," he said softly.

A spot of hectic red flew to Vipero's cheeks, but he chose to ignore the thrust. He turned to McGinnis.

" 'Ave you fetch *ze muri?*"

"Yes," McGinnis jerked his thumb toward the youth, "but I understood you to say that he had killed Moto Zop."

Vipero's yellow teeth were bared in a malicious grin. "Ze *muri* mus' die. He 'as been accuse of weechcraft. Hees life ees forfeit by hees own people. I 'ave not tell you—thees—I know you do not believe."

"Witchcraft!" laughed McGinnis contemptuously. "Whom has he bewitched?"

"Ze cattle all die."

"Bah! The tsetse fly and you know it."

"Ze leetle bug can not keel ze cow, señor," said Vipero mockingly.

"Who made the charge?"

"I—Vipero." He tapped himself on his broad chest.

"I suppose the trial will be by the usual poison test, won't it?"

"But, of course."

"All right—I agree."

"Agree?" Vipero raised his eyebrows in surprise. "What else could Señor McGeenes do?" Then he turned and walked rapidly toward Moto Zop's hut.

SMITH rolled a cigaret and lighted it all the while watching the departing Portuguese.

"It would take the divine power of the Omnipotent," he declared feelingly, "to raise that criminal mishap to the moral level of a pot-bellied chimpanzee. What did he mean by the poison test?"

"I suppose you'd call it a trial by ordeal," explained McGinnis, "and it is probably one of the most horrible customs practiced by the savages anywhere on the Congo—except cannibalism itself, and sometimes these two are combined. This trial business I've witnessed more than once. Whenever one of these poor devils is accused of witchcraft, murder of his own father, theft of kola nuts, or several other minor offenses, he is forced to undergo the poison test which in about four cases out of five proves fatal.

"The poison is taken from the bark of a native tree. I once had a piece of it identified by a botanist and he called it the guineense tree or something like that. This bark is pounded into a fine powder and mixed to a thick paste. Then the dough is baked into five small loaves or tablets, and the accused man is made to eat them one after the other, following which he is given all the palm wine he can drink. If, as is the case about one time in five, he vomits, it is a certain proof of his innocence. If he does not then it is a sign that the *Moloki* is in him and will not come out. For the next fifteen minutes the man's relatives crowd about him and call upon this evil spirit to come out.

"After it has been ascertained that he is guilty he is buried in a hole in the ground, still alive, and a huge fire is builded over the grave to keep the *Moloki* from escaping. If, on the other hand, the man has proven himself innocent by the before-mentioned process, the accuser must furnish a pig and there is a feast and great celebration, the victim being honored, and even carried about the village on the shoulders of his friends."

Smith's face hardened.

"Are you goin' to let that poor devil of *muri* in for that?"

"No way to prevent it," returned McGinnis with a shrug, "but we'll see to it that he comes out with colors flying."

"How?"

"Emetic—ipecac."

Smith's mouth split in a grin of admiration. Silently he made a deep bow of obeisance, and then turned back to his supervision of the erection of the stage.

Vipero gave his orders for the preparation of the ordeal, but the *muri*, engaged in helping Smith, did not realize the meaning of the activity until two women approached him with basins of white clay with which to smear his body. For an instant a look of haunted fear twitched his face, and his eyes sought McGinnis' imploringly, but the latter's back was turned.

With a visible effort to regain his self-control, he stoically masked his face and submitted to the ministrations of the women. A few minutes later, daubed with the white clay from head to foot, he stalked forward toward Moto Zop's hut not far from which several of the natives were busily engaged in digging a pit, the meaning of which was all too apparent. Before the *muri* had advanced ten steps McGinnis fell in beside him.

"Do not fear," he said in a guarded tone. "I will see that the cakes do not hurt you."

The *muri* flashed a grateful glance at him, but was too cautious to express his relief so that the others might understand. With an unintelligible grunt to show that he understood, he quickened his pace and strode to the edge of the pit.

Vipero, accompanied by Moto Zop, appeared and in a small bowl he carried the five cakes. A mat was placed on the ground a few yards from the pit and the *muri* was forced by three of the warriors to seat himself upon it while his relatives gathered around him and his accuser and Moto Zop arranged themselves opposite him. One of the two fighting men caught up the bowl of loaves and gave one of them to the *muri* who slowly munched it, every eye in the crowd fixed upon him.

Unseen, McGinnis pushed his way through the crowd and finally located the bowl of palm wine at the feet of the other warrior. While those in the circle were gazing at the *muri*, McGinnis edged forward and, gaining a position beside the guardian of the bowl, he poured the entire contents of a small vial into the wine. Then he moved away unobtrusively.

The *muri* ate the last of the loaves and the warrior handed the bowl of palm wine to him. He drank deeply until almost half of the contents had disappeared and then placed the vessel on the ground before him. Almost immediately the emetic had the desired effect, so quickly that it seemed to arouse Vipero's suspicions. The Portuguese shot a swift glance from McGinnis to Smith and then to the *muri*, and then under cover of the joyous confusion among the *muri's* relatives, he stepped forward to examine the wine.

Smith who had been watching him covertly strode forward as if to congratulate the *muri*. He reached the bowl a step before Vipero and his foot crashed into the bowl shattering it into a dozen pieces. It was done so quickly and so palpably was it a simple accident, that even Vipero for an instant was fooled. He stared at Smith for a minute, but the latter absolutely ignored him, and with a shrug the Portuguese turned away and ordered one of his followers to produce a pig for the feast.

CHAPTER VI

VIPERO joined Moto Zop and the pair remained in deep and interested conversation for half an hour. Watching them from the corner of his eye McGinnis soon became convinced that the Portuguese was explaining the purpose of the visit by the two whites, and demanding that Moto Zop take instant action to destroy the menace which threatened their business.

The willingness with which Moto Zop listened showed McGinnis that the time was ripe to come to a showdown and, accordingly, he hunted up Smith who was lounging in the shade smoking off the mosquitoes.

"Vipero and the old chief are decidin' on our verdict, so we'd better get busy, Smith," explained McGinnis shortly. "I'm going to round up the boys and hold 'em ready for an emergency."

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," promised Smith arising, "but you'll have to do the ballyhooin'. I don't savvy the lingo."

McGinnis nodded and went his way. Casually he called aside his two headmen who were in charge of the porters and explained to them the situation and then he joined Smith on the little canopied platform. The latter was placing such objects as he expected to need upon a collapsible table and two canvas chairs within convenient reach.

"Better give 'em the best you've got in shop, Smith," warned McGinnis in a guarded tone. "The cold truth is that the lives of two white men and a gang of niggers are hinging on your ability to put your stuff across."

From a bag Smith drew a revolver and calmly examined its mechanism. Then he placed it among the other articles on the table and looked up with a grin.

"Are the breaks of the game going against us?" he queried.

McGinnis shrugged. "Not that, particularly, only it's a stiffer game than I was expecting. Vipero has old Moto Zop and the entire tribe under his thumb and they are afraid to cross him. Still we ought to be able to slip the skids under him. I'm not losing confidence, but I'm just warning you so that you won't get careless. Give 'em some real stuff."

"Huh! Trust me!" grunted Smith, with a wry smile. "If the box-office receipts are what you say they are, a man is going to show his wares. But I'll admit that it is the first game I ever played in where the pot was an elephant graveyard if you win, and a roasting spit if you lose. Makes a fellow feel sort of queer."

HE DISAPPEARED behind a curtain and began to don his mystical Hindoo robes. Three minutes later he stepped out again and advanced to the edge of the platform.

"You may fire when you're ready," he said with a nod to McGinnis.

McGinnis advanced a couple of paces and raised his hands over his head, palm outward.

"Men of Mombala," he called in a loud voice, "come forward and hear the message which the *Moloki* sends to you."

There was a stir and considerable excited chatter among the loungers, both men and women, who were gathered about the fire over which Vipero's pig was cooking whole. Gradually they began to approach the platform in groups of twos and threes, albeit with caution and visible fear. McGinnis, with a smile, saw his own men gather in a compact body on the left of the stage, and both he and the Mombalans knew that each of the Kikuyu men carried a knife in his breech-clout and that they were adept in the use of them.

Vipero and Moto Zop came forward, flanked by the hundred or more ivory porters whom, it appeared, had been trained into a semblance of military tactics, for they marched in close order and maintained a rigid line. Old Moto Zop's expression was a curious mixture of awe and malice, and it was plain to McGinnis that the savage chieftain was wavering between ordering a swift execution and gratifying his intense curiosity about the *Moloki's* message. Vipero, on the other hand, was smiling urbanely, sardonically, and the glance he shot at McGinnis was one of gloating satisfaction.

It was only then that McGinnis discovered the reason for that cock-sure expression. Half hidden behind the ranks of the advancing porters was a picked bodyguard of stalwart Ngombe warriors, each armed with a repeating rifle. There were at least thirty of this corps and it required only a glance to see that they had been trained to the point where their effectiveness in an unorganized mob would be all-powerful. This settled the affair as far as the possibilities of the outcome of a fight were concerned. Those thirty men literally could wipe out the opposition with ten minutes of concerted effort.

Smith leaned forward, his eyes glinting humorously.

"Tell Vipero," he whispered, "that he has forgot to call out his navy."

"It doesn't look much like a walkover for us," admitted McGinnis, "however they can be buffaloed as quick as the others. Get ready to do your stuff. If it doesn't go over we'll shoot it out and break for the jungle."

McGINNIS faced the crowd, and his right hand rested in his coat pocket about the butt of his automatic. He had noted Vipero's position and had marked him for his own at the first sign of trouble. With him out of the way, it might be barely possible to frighten the blacks into submission, but then again, to open fire on the Portuguese might bring the end.

"The great *Moloki*," began McGinnis in a penetrating, yet moderate tone, "sends his greetings to the Mombala men, and his words will be given to you from time to time through Ju-Ju, his great chief." McGinnis pointed dramatically at Smith. "The *Moloki* has decided to show you that Ju-Ju is his chief. Watch the Ju-Ju closely and you will see that he is the true son of *Moloki*. For many suns the Ju-Ju is going to remain in Mombalaland, and with his great wisdom point out the path which it is necessary for the Mombalan to travel. He will have many good words of advice to give you."

Although the Mombalan tongue did not lend itself to oratory, McGinnis saw that his words were understood, and that the natives were staring at Smith, half inclined to flee yet filled with the overpowering curiosity of the child of nature untouched by the wisdom of civilization. McGinnis bowed reverently to Smith and then descended from the platform and stood with his back to his own men and in such a position that he was able to keep an eye on Vipero ten feet to his right.

It was apparent from the beginning that the report of the Ju-Ju's magic had been noised over the village so that every man, woman, and child of the tribe seemingly was crowded in a wide semicircle about the stage out of which were nearly three hundred fighting men. Smith, evidently impressed by the ominous silence and aware of the heavy odds against them, paused for a minute and then beckoned McGinnis back to the platform. The other quickly complied for he had soon discovered that the high stage had offered a vantage point from which he could see every movement on the part of the crowd while the actions of those in the rear ranks were hidden from him if he remained down on the ground.

"I may need you in one or two of the stunts," whispered Smith when McGinnis had gained his side. "But my real reason for calling you back is this: if it comes to a fight, I'll spring that trap in the floor and we'll duck under the stage, grab the rifles and break for the woods."

McGinnis nodded and stepped to one side where he leaned against an upright and gave his attention to the audience. Despite his confidence in the outcome he was forced to realize that the situation was desperate, that they were sitting on a keg of powder and that the slightest miscue, the veriest, unexpected misstep, would be a lighted match to the train. If Smith failed to impress those Ngombe warriors to the extent that they would disobey Vipero's orders, or if they opened fire through stark fear of the magical powers of the performer, the result would be the same. Unconsciously McGinnis found himself braced for instant action as Smith picked up his wand.

FROM a tube of tin some three inches in diameter and two feet long which was shown to be empty, the Ju-Ju then began extracting such a quantity of ribbon, tissue paper, brightly colored handkerchiefs and artificial flowers that those nearest him gasped in surprise and fear. Catching the end of a crimson ribbon on his wand he began to twirl it about his head, drawing out the seemingly endless strand until it formed a perfect canopy over him. At last he stopped and, gathering up the various objects, tossed them out toward the crowd.

"A gift from the *Moloki*," cried McGinnis, but not one in the inner rows would touch the stuff. Instead they drew back from it in terror.

The Ju-Ju's second feat was the old Hindoo favorite in which he filled a small bowl with rice, covered it with another bowl which apparently was empty, and then inverted the two bowls. Uttering his cabalistic words, he waved his wand over it and then removed the cover. A live pigeon arose and, circling over his head twice, alighted on the table beside him.

"Good work!" applauded McGinnis, noting with a wave of satisfaction and relief, the deep feeling of awe and fear which settled over the onlookers. In that instant he missed Vipero and a lightning glance showed him that the Portuguese had slipped through the crowd to the rear.

"Look out!" he hissed to Smith. "Vipero's playin' his trump card—now."

Not for a second did McGinnis doubt the purpose of the Portuguese. He knew that the latter would make his play as soon as he saw his control over the natives slipping, and Smith's magic was having just the effect that McGinnis knew it would.

Suddenly the crowd before the platform split and swung to each side forming an open space some thirty feet in width which was immediately filled with the armed Ngombes who ran forward to within ten feet of the platform followed by Vipero completely under cover of their protection. Both McGinnis and Smith leaped toward the center of the stage and Smith was seeking the hidden spring to spring the trap when Vipero stepped to the front.

"Hold!" whispered McGinnis. "I want one crack at that bird. It might win for us."

Vipero began to speak rapidly, and it was apparent that he had no intention of ordering his men to open fire just then, for he evidently feared the result.

"This man," he declared pointing a finger at Smith, "says he is a messenger from the *Moloki*. He lies—he is the *Moloki* himself."

McGinnis stared at the speaker bewilderedly. Vipero appeared to be playing right into their hands—he was increasing the fear and awe of the people. But the next instant his devilish cunning became apparent.

"We will see whether he is the Evil Spirit or not. If he is the *Moloki* no bullet can hurt him. If he dies then he is a liar and a faker."

It was convincing logic to the Mombalan mind, and it showed McGinnis two things: that Vipero was in absolute control of the thirty riflemen, and their time was exceedingly short. His automatic flashed from his pocket and in another instant Vipero at least would precede them to eternity, but Smith threw out a protesting hand.

"Wait!" he cried. "What's the game?"

"He says that you are the *Moloki* and that a bullet won't kill you."

"Tell him he's right," replied Smith shortly, "and that I can prove it."

CHAPTER VII

FOR an instant McGinnis did not understand. "But—"

"But—hell!" exploded Smith. "It's a trick and I've done it a hundred times. Tell him that no bullet has ever been molded that can kill me, and that I can convince them of it. Tell 'em that I will not consent to any one shooting me but Moto Zop, since it is fitting that only a chieftain should have anything to do with a Ju-Ju. Tell 'em that—we can't be in a worse fix than we are now and it'll gain time anyway."

In a few words McGinnis explained Smith's orders, and he saw that the offer had made a deep impression. Vipero was taken aback, and stared at McGinnis with eyes closed to slits. Plainly he had not expected such a move, but there was nothing he could do but await developments. To order his men to shoot then might have disastrous results, for it was apparent that the riflemen themselves were hesitating.

Moto Zop at first refused to come forward, but when he saw that all the village expected it of him and that as chief he must not exhibit fear and cowardice, he approached reluctantly. His face was an enigmatic mask, and it was only his faltering footsteps which betrayed him, nevertheless he clambered to the platform and stood before Smith watching every move the white man made.

The Ju-Ju tossed an empty bowl to the ground before the stage and then picked up a heavy calibered revolver. With a quick aim he fired at the bowl and the fragments of it flew in every direction. There could be no doubt that the weapon was deadly, as Smith was evidently trying to prove by the action. Then he placed the gun in Moto Zop's hand and stepped back five paces to a point near the opposite edge of the stage. The old chieftain who showed a familiarity in the use of this weapon, glanced into the chambers of the cylinder to see whether or not it was loaded, and then gave it a tentative twirl to see that it was in working order. Apparently satisfied he glanced at Smith for further instructions.

"Tell him to aim at my eyes and fire twice," said Smith to McGinnis, and the latter complied.

Slowly, almost reverently, Moto Zop raised the gun until the barrel was on a level with the magician's face, and despite his palpable fear, his hand was as steady as steel.

McGINNIS held his breath and waited. There could be no fault in the aim, and if the trick—whatever it was—failed to work, his chance would be worth no more than that of the man who faced the revolver with folded arms and utter confidence. A hush settled over the place and the very silence seemed to be taut and waiting.

Then came the flash and report—once—twice—and then Moto Zop, his mouth open in ludicrous dismay, dropped his weapon to the floor and with a cry of terror and dismay, leaped from the stage and fled incontinently toward his hut, showing a surprising agility for his age. For an instant the crowd stood staring at Smith, either so bewildered and stunned that they were unable to move, or not able to comprehend what had happened. Then the Ju-Ju smiled, opened his mouth—and showed them two bullets held tightly between his teeth.

That was enough to dissolve the last vestige of doubt and courage yet remaining to any of them, and with a shout the crowd broke and fled pell-mell in every direction, the riflemen leading them. Nor did they halt in their mad flight until the last one had disappeared from view entirely, leaving McGinnis and the Ju-Ju in complete control of the field. Even McGinnis' own men had vanished with the others.

Fervently and wordlessly McGinnis caught and wrung Smith's hand.

"And that's that!" quoth Smith flippantly, as he produced tobacco and papers. But the hand that lighted the cigaret trembled visibly, and McGinnis knew that what he had long suspected was true, *viz*, that Smith's courage was of that type which seeks to cover his fear in nonchalant bravado. The next instant he sank weakly to a chair.

"I don't mind telling you," he said with a sigh of relief, "that three minutes ago I wouldn't have given one of those elephant's wisdom teeth for both of our lives."

"'Twas a thin-skinned chance and no mistake," replied McGinnis. "But what I would like to know is how in the devil you pulled that trick. It's a world-beater, and I know I never saw anything like it by your profession."

"It's a silly trick. I swapped revolvers when every one was looking at the bowl I shot. The second revolver was loaded with a special bullet made of wax which melts with the heat of the explosion although it looks like a regular lead bullet. I had the extra bullets in my mouth all the time."

McGinnis laughed—and wondered why that laugh sounded unnatural until he realized that he too had been laboring under an exhausting tension and that the relief made him feel like a boy turned out of school. He turned and surveyed the village, a spirit of elation tingling at his finger tips.

"Looks like our friend, Vipero, has trekked it also," he said. "Take my word for it, we haven't seen the last of him. He's the kind that dies hard."

"I saw him scoot when the riot started. What do you think he'll do?"

"Nothing—with these Mombalans. They have enough to last them for a while, but he'll head for Boma, or some place down the river for reinforcements."

LATER, upon the return of the porters who had been rounded up by the *muri*, McGinnis found that his surmise had been correct—in part. Vipero was gone, taking with him two men whom he had forced to accompany him at the point of a gun, and having no visible supplies. But, instead of heading west for Boma, he had taken the eastern route across the hills toward the headwaters of the Congo. McGinnis puzzled over this for a quarter of an hour without coming to any satisfactory explanation.

Perhaps he feared instantaneous retaliation and had fled into the nearest protecting jungle, intending to circle the village and head for his brother at Boma. This would delay a pursuit and throw his trailers off the track temporarily, in case McGinnis ordered his capture. Moto Zop, on the other hand, had retired into his grass palace and seemed to have no inclination to come out again. Fearing the wrath of the *Moloki*, the other natives were in hiding in the forest awaiting the decision of the Ju-Ju.

McGinnis dispatched the *muri* with a message that no harm would be done to them if they would return and offer no further violence to the Ju-Ju and his white companion. He further declared that he would purchase another pig of them and that they would feast in friendship and peace, following which the Ju-Ju would take up his residence among them and would give them such presents as the *Moloki* had sent to the Mombalan people.

An hour later the *muri* returned with probably two score of the natives and the latter gathered about the roasting pig while every few minutes they would cast a furtive glance toward the camp of the white man. Through the *muri* McGinnis secured another pig for the feast, but the owner would have no beads, feathers nor anything else in payment.

As the shadows of sunset began to lengthen out, others joined the few who had returned to the village, and each one seemed to gain more confidence when it was apparent that the Ju-Ju was friendly. Realizing that the situation was riding smoothly toward their ends, McGinnis and Smith, accompanied by the *muri*, approached Moto Zop's palace. The two white men halted under the canopy and waited while the *muri* went in to see if he could persuade the chief to come to a conference.

Evidently the *muri* faced a stiff opposition to this request for it was fully half an hour before they made their appearance, and even then the old savage seemed to expect a quick and painful retribution. Gone was every hint of his former arrogance, and malice against the Ju-Ju, and in their stead was only humility, and perhaps a cringing fear.

McGinnis and the *muri* took it turn about explaining to him that the anger of the *Moloki* was directed against Vipero alone, and that no harm or injury was going to fall upon the heads of Moto Zop or any of his followers. Under these promises the old man recovered his poise with remarkable rapidity, but so deeply was his fear of the Ju-Ju that he was pitifully eager to accede to any demands made of him.

THE terms under which the ivory fields were to be exploited were by far more generous than those he had enjoyed with Vipero, and Moto Zop was highly pleased with the results of the interview. Proudly he went with them to the feast, and to show his appreciation of the honor accorded to him by the Ju-Ju and his friend, the old man exhausted his supply of palm wine, so that there was a celebration in the village that night, the equal of which could not be recalled by the oldest citizens.

Late that night, when the feast was over and the gorged Mombalans were sleeping around the fire where the wine had overcome them, McGinnis and Smith started for their tent, the *muri* following a few paces in the rear. A thought suddenly flashed into McGinnis' mind and he halted in his tracks.

"What is it?" queried Smith in a whisper.

"Nothing—much," he replied. "Wait 'til I ask the *muri* a couple of questions."

Calling the youth, the two carried on a short conversation, at the end of which McGinnis gave vent to a low whistle.

"Let's have it," said Smith. "What's the news?"

"I asked him what country was east of here—the direction Vipero took—and he told me that it was the Basoko country—the Land of the Pelele."

"That so? What's the matter with it?"

"The lip-plug tribes," explained McGinnis. "You've heard of them, haven't you?"

"No."

"Well, they're the most hideous and the most dangerous of any tribe in Central Africa, absolutely without fear, and when it comes to cannibalism—that's a habit with 'em. They wear huge plugs in their upper lips and I've seen—"

"Does Vipero know them?" interrupted Smith.

"Used to have his headquarters at Basoko, so the *muri* says."

"Then you think—"

"I think that trouble has just started as far as we are concerned," cut in McGinnis. "But we're safe for a week yet, and it's up to us to get ready for him. Meantime we'll take a look at our ivory cache tomorrow."

"And the ivory gates of Heaven the next day," prophesied Smith. "Or is it pearl?"

CHAPTER VIII

EARLY the following morning McGinnis was astir, getting ready for the expedition into the mountains to the south. With care he selected twenty of the Kikuyus as a bodyguard, and then he and Smith sat down to breakfast with the *muri* waiting upon them as was his self-appointed custom.

"When do you expect our mutual friend, Señor Vipero?" asked Smith, pouring a second cup of coffee.

"Knowing the inherent laziness of these Congo people, I don't think he can make it in less than a week," replied McGinnis after a moment's thought. "We'll allow him four days as an inside limit."

"Then you've doped out a plan?"

McGinnis nodded. "To be honest with you I'm not over-anxious to mingle with those Basoko lip-pluggers—I don't like the idea of tempting their appetites, so I'm thinking that it is policy for us to slide from under while the going is good."

"You quittin'?"

"Not by a damn sight!" returned McGinnis sharply. "We're coming back—in force—to settle our little account with Vipero. Meanwhile we're taking a look at the ivory field before we start. That means three days—one to get there, one to look over the deposit, and one to return. Then on the same night we return we're heading northeast for Nairoba where we're going to organize into an ivory export company and you can sell out and retire if you like—that is, if the field is what I think it is going to be."

Smith was silent for a space of several seconds.

"I don't like the idea of running away," he said at last, "but if those lip-plug birds have got you buffaloed, it's a cinch I'm not going to welcome 'em as a committee of one. But I'm not ready to sell out just yet, thank you."

"I wasn't reflectin' on your nerve, Smith," declared McGinnis, aware of the fact that the other had resented the imputation of selling out. "I'd sell myself if it wasn't that I've got a little score to settle with Vipero."

"As a partner I claim my share in that," declared Smith shortly.

TRAVELING light in order to make all possible speed, they took up the trek toward the misty hill country to the south, and quickly threaded the dense jungle along the river coming out an hour later upon the more open plains interspersed by cane-breaks and rolling savannahs. Through the broiling sun they marched until the heat became unbearable, and then they rested in the shade of a clump of palms for three hours and waited for the cooler hours of the evening.

The jagged, volcanic hills grew closer until as the sun dropped to the level of the western foothills, they loomed over them, dominant, purple-clad, and mysterious. Without a moment's hesitation the *muri* led the party up a narrow valley until they breasted a plateau at the farther edge of which arose a low row of sharply elevated hills. Across this elevation they followed a trail, worn deep in the grass, as if it had been trod by the feet of thousands of animals through many ages, and McGinnis felt something akin to an awed thrill when he realized that it was the *via doloroso* of aged elephants literally dying on their feet as they ended their last pilgrimage.

On reaching the top of the basalt rim the party halted and stared at the vista which opened up before them. The light was fast fading, but it was still strong enough to enable McGinnis to get a good idea of the scene. It was, as he had surmised, the crater of an extinct volcano of that series of which Kilimanjaro is the king. It was circular in shape and probably four miles in diameter, the bottom being covered with a dense tropical growth, and in the center gleamed a small lake, undoubtedly the surface water which could have no outlet.

The *muri* plunged down a steep, worn path with McGinnis and Smith at his heels while the twenty porters trooped after, awed into silence by that mysticism of the crater which was felt but not evidenced by any visible phenomena. In the gathering darkness McGinnis saw the whitened bones of the dead elephants on each side of the path, growing ever more plentiful as the path neared the bottom of the valley. Then the tangled forest closed over them with a pall of darkness through which still gleamed the vague glow of the skeletons half covered by the foliage.

The *muri* advanced with the assurance of one who was intimately acquainted with the trail, and at the end of probably half an hour he halted under the brow of what appeared to be a towering cliff. A bright fire was kindled and by its light the camp was thrown together. After a hasty supper, and completely done up by the rigors of the trek, every one except McGinnis and Smith fell asleep almost immediately. For a long time they sat before the campfire gazing out into the crater.

The only sound was that vibrant pean from innumerable scaly throats, a fantastical chorus of the metallic-voiced insects of the jungle, carrying with it a weird, unnatural hint of the echoes of a hopeless dirge. A damp air, chilling and odorous, arose from the jungle and closed about them causing both of them to shiver and settle closer to the fire, each knowing full well that the chill was not alone responsible for the action. This dampness had about it the smell of a thousand years of rotted vegetable and animal decay, the accumulation of centuries of life-deserted matter.

"Fee—Fo—Fum!" declared Smith facetiously. "I feel like a grave robber. It's an eerie place, eh?"

McGinnis shrugged expressively. "Let's turn in."

THE next day was spent almost entirely in surveying the possibilities of the field, and McGinnis quickly saw that the deposit by far exceeded his wildest flight of imagination. The ground was literally carpeted with the bones of the great beasts, some of the skeletons plainly visible while others were so completely hidden in the foliage and covered with decayed vegetation that they would escape any but the most discriminating and experienced eye. Although he could not see into the murky depths of the lake, he was satisfied that a fortune lay in that muck along the shores, for there were many evidences that the lake varied in size according to the rainfall.

It was also possible that it would be a paying proposition to dig beneath the surface, for ivory more often than not was not injured by the passing years save that it took on a yellow tint and in some instances this product brought even a better price than the fresher variety. All told there were more than five years of work before them before they could hope to take out all the ivory, and he roughly estimated the total value to run somewhere in the proximity of half a million pounds.

He selected twelve of the most choice specimens of the stuff, the most perfect tusks he had ever seen, save those of central India, and then he made several photographs of the deposit to facilitate the organization of the company in Nairoba, following which he made ready to break camp for he did not desire to spend another night in the crater, at least not until a permanent camp had been established. He was not superstitious, but there was something uncanny about the thing which did not act as a sedative to say the least.

While the porters were packing their burdens McGinnis caught the sound of a heavy, dull crash in the underbrush forty or fifty yards away from the camp. He stooped and picked up his Bury rifle, at the same instant calling the other members of the party to be on their guard. The sounds increased steadily, indicating that whatever it was, it was drawing closer without paying particular regard to the impediments which lay in its path.

SUDDENLY a giant bull elephant broke through the fringe of bushes and stood staring at them swaying slightly from side to side. McGinnis saw in a flash that the mastodon was almost as old as the forest in which he stood, his rusty skin crisscrossed with a thousand corrugations, his huge form gaunt and emaciated. The call of death had brought him leagues through the pathless jungle to this, the last resting place of his kind, to die in peace and solitude.

And this solitude had been destroyed by an alien, desecrated by the presence of his great enemy—man. The small bead-like eyes glared at the intruders with an unmistakable expression of hate, his ears fanned to and fro with indecision, and his head was raised high, defiant and threatening. McGinnis felt a thrill of admiration stir him at the valiant, warlike stand by the old bull with almost his last breath. It was primal instinct gaining expression in a super exhibition of courage, and McGinnis fervently wished that it were possible to slip away and leave the old bull to his solitude.

But it was only for an instant that the beast hesitated, and then, throwing his proboscis over his head, he trumpeted a hoarse challenge and charged. He staggered, almost fell, but regained his balance and in a shambling awkward run which was unbelievably swift he bore down upon the camp. McGinnis, hemmed in by the wall of rock and the thick undergrowth, knew that there was only one thing to do and he did it. Throwing his Bury to his shoulder he let the bull have it with both barrels, squarely between the eyes, and then leaped aside in surprise. The old fighter did not drop at the impact, but plunged forward several steps, impelled by that strange instinctive force, and he died literally on his feet, finally dropping beside the surprised Smith.

"Plain case of self-defense," he said to McGinnis a minute later, unconsciously trying to excuse the necessary deed.

"I hated to do that," declared McGinnis contritely. "Game old devil—dying on his feet."

Smith searched in his pack and produced a kodak.

"I want a picture of him," he declared, stepping back a few yards in order to get the proper focus. At that moment the *muri* leaped for Smith's rifle and fumbled at the straps trying to get it out of its case.

"Hell's Bells!" cried Smith, dropping his camera and going to the *muri's* assistance, and McGinnis whirled to see the cause of their excitement.

ALMOST in the very opening through which the bull had appeared stood Vipero and at his back was a veritable swarm of black warriors whose hideously protruding upper lips bespoke them as the men of the Pelele. Instinctively McGinnis' rifle swung to his shoulder and the bead covered Vipero's broad chest. The click of the hammer on an empty barrel echoed to him like the trumpet of doom.

"Ze señor's gun," said Vipero with a bland smile, "eet ees empty, same like ze gun of ze Ju-Ju who catch ze bullet in hees teeth."

He advanced with leisurely stride, his crooked smile ever widening. But there was a sinister menace in that smile, a threat that could mean but one thing.

Realizing that resistance in the face of those odds would be worse than useless, McGinnis signalled the entire party to surrender. He had a suspicion that whatever the punishment and ultimate execution, it would take place in Moto Zop's village in order that Vipero might regain control of the ivory field and the goodwill of the Mombalans. An instant later he and his companions, including the twenty porters, were bound hand and foot, while the lip-plug warriors gathered about the refreshened fire and started to feast upon the glutinous feet and trunk of the old elephant.

CHAPTER IX

VIPERO took no chances with his two white prisoners that night. As a safeguard he separated them, placing a substantial guard over each and maintaining this guard throughout the night. When the start was made for the Mombalan village the next morning, the bonds of both of them were released from their legs, but their hands were still bound, and in this manner they began the march.

Great was the excitement in the Mombalan village upon their arrival, the men crowding closely, unable to comprehend how the great Ju-Ju had become Vipero's prisoner. The captor, smiling crookedly, explained to the crowd that the Ju-Ju was a faker and that all his magic was tricks with which he had fooled them. Then he spoke to the lip-plug men, ordering them to make the preparations which he had previously explained to them. It was only then that McGinnis discovered the lip-plug language to be one of the Sulu dialects which he was able to follow without difficulty.

The procession had halted in the open space before the stage, and the Pelele crew piled wood in two large pyres to each of which Vipero himself applied the match. The purpose of this was palpably evident to every one present, for the undisguised cannibalism of the Pelele was well known. And these fighting men went about the business with a methodical precision which bespoke practise.

McGinnis and Smith were left standing together near the platform, their arms still bound, but otherwise free to move about as they chose. Desperately McGinnis had weighed every chance, but the end seemed inevitable, unless a miracle happened. He had decided to risk everything on a single throw of the dice—one last appeal to the Mombalans, and this appeal had engrossed his thoughts ever since his capture.

Smith strolled to his side and began speaking in a casual tone so that he would not attract the attention of the Peleles.

"I've got these damned thongs worked loose on my hands," he said, "so that I can jerk 'em free any time. Tell the *muri* to slip under the stage and get a gun for me. There's two automatics among that junk somewhere."

In order to obtain the friendship and goodwill of the Mombalans Vipero had not offered any injury or indignity to the porters or the *muri* and they were permitted to do as they pleased. McGinnis had seen the *muri* talking to the Kikuyu porters, pleading with them, but it was apparent that they did not dare oppose the Pelele warriors in the face of such odds.

McGinnis drew near the *muri* and quietly ordered him to find the guns, but to remain under the stage until he heard the signal to return which would be a shrill whistle. He further ordered the *muri* to watch the proceedings from under cover and act as he saw fit in case of an emergency. At the same time McGinnis was struck by a new idea, a plan so daring that it almost took away his breath. After giving it a more detailed consideration, he rejoined Smith.

"I've got a plan, Smith," he whispered. "Are you game to try it?"

"What is it?" There was a pallor on Smith's face, and his former flippant attitude had completely vanished.

"You're to give another performance. I'm goin' to taunt Vipero into giving you another chance to show your powers—with him as your helper. Keep still about your hands for a while."

Smith nodded and walked away for Vipero was watching them closely.

"Mombalans," cried McGinnis, "listen to me. *Bwana* Vipero would slay the great Ju-Ju. That is impossible—the Ju-Ju can not die by human hands. This he has proved to you by catching the bullets in his teeth. The great Ju-Ju would give the Mombalans a chance to prove that they are not cowards, afraid of the Peleles, and he demands that you make *Bwana* Vipero loose his bonds."

"The Ju-Ju should laugh at bonds," replied Vipero in the Mombalan dialect. "He is the great magician of the *Moloki*, but cannot release his hands from the little ropes. Bah!"

McGinnis turned his last trump.

"The Ju-Ju challenges *Bwana* Vipero to go upon the platform with him. With his hands bound behind him he will bring the *Moloki* to his aid—and then the *Moloki* will disappear carrying with him *Bwana* Vipero."

THE challenge had a startling effect on the Mombalans, and even the men of the Pelele were visibly impressed when McGinnis repeated his challenge in the Sulu dialect. It was plain that most of them were skeptical, but it was also apparent that they were curious. Moto Zop approached as close as he dared and back of him stood a hundred Mombalans, rigid as statues, tense, expectant.

Vipero studied the crowd for a full minute before acting, and it was evident that he saw enough in the faces of the onlookers to convince him that McGinnis had struck home. With a significant gesture in which he loosened the automatic in the holster at his thigh, he arose and strode defiantly to the platform. Smith followed, struggling up the small ladder with difficulty, for he was not able to use his hands on the rungs.

McGinnis leaned against the grass walls of the underpinning of the stage and unobtrusively beat a tattoo upon it with his fist. Thrusting his hand through the grass he made an aperture through which he spoke in a low tone.

"Be ready with a club—the trap door near the middle of the platform."

Surrounded by his Pelele men who outnumbered the Mombalan warriors and who were greatly feared by Moto Zop's followers, Vipero was confident, yet wary, for he had learned his lesson three days earlier. With one hand resting on the butt of his gun he stood at the edge of the platform facing the crowd with a derisive grin on his face.

"Will the señor step back here out of the glare of the sun?" asked Smith with a bow, and Vipero obeyed, albeit watchful of every move the other made.

McGinnis, his every nerve taut, his breath whistling in his excitement, restrained his desire to shout with a mighty effort, for Vipero was standing directly over the trap door. Suddenly Smith straightened and with a jerk freed his hands, and snatched a red curtain from its hangings beside them.

Vipero's gun leaped at the same instant that Smith passed the curtain between him and the crowd, and McGinnis heard a slight, grating sound—a thump. Smith tossed the curtain into the air behind him and stepped out to the front of the platform—alone. Vipero had vanished.

NO NATIVE African mind could function rationally in the face of that supernatural exhibition, and no native African courage could stand long before it. Once more those solid black phalanxes broke in abject terror and fled howling for safety. Only Moto Zop and a score of his men remained and McGinnis had an idea that they were so paralyzed by fear that they had been unable to move.

McGinnis ran to the rear of the platform and jerked aside the flap that covered the opening under the stage. A minute later he strolled back to Smith who severed the bonds about the trader's wrists.

"Nothin' of a fake about that trick, Smith," he declared softly. "The *Moloki* got Vipero sure as shootin'. The *muri* was a little over-enthusiastic with his club."

"Dead?"

McGinnis nodded soberly.

"I'm sorry," murmured Smith with a half sigh. "I'm really sorry—that I didn't get a chance to swap jobs with the *muri*."

An hour later, as they sat before Moto Zop's hut drinking the chief's palm wine only because they knew that custom demanded it, the chief of the Peleles sent a Mombalan messenger to sue for peace and the friendship of the great Ju-Ju.

"Tell 'em," ordered Smith emphatically, "that the great Ju-Ju desires nothing so much as their immediate departure, if not sooner, and that if he ever sees one of 'em again he will make the *Moloki* come and carry 'em off. You can also tell 'em that the *Moloki* earnestly advises that they limit their appetites to a vegetable diet for the rest of their natural lives."

WILLIAM
CORCORAN'S
*new story
of an intrepid
Western Sheriff*

Rosy Regan TALKS

IN THE middle of Desolation Flat three men sat about the gray ashes of a fire. Nearby four horses, tethered to a clump of greasewood, drooped in heat worn misery. Beyond the camp in every direction stretched miles of lifeless sand, rock croppings and dancing heat.

The three had not spoken for some time. Two of them sat in a sort of sullen defiance, their eyes through narrowed lids watching the man opposite. They were very much alike, with their overalls and boots and worn Stetsons, their complexions burnished by desert suns. Yet two marks distinguished each from all other men; a little scar that twisted the mouth of the slender one, and a broken nose that marred the broad face of the other. They were men of violence, hard men by the term of the country.

The third was a stocky man of grizzled mustache and keen blue eyes. He was obviously master of the situation, yet he glanced up and eyed the pair in grim dissatisfaction. Their gaze held his a moment, then fell away with a gleam of mockery.

"How long you two holding out on me?" the third demanded. His voice, though merciless with determination, was thickened by the dryness of his mouth. At his feet were three canteens. Two were empty; the third was corked, but precious little water was in it. It was significant, too, that a pair of holstered guns lay beside the canteens, and that a third, the only other gun in sight, hung on the belt of this man, convenient to his right hand.

"We got nothing to say, Sheriff," replied the one of the broken nose. "We been tellin' you over and over that we don't know how Pete Hanley got killed."

"Didn't even know he was dead," contributed he of the scar.

"We been prospectin' for the past three weeks and wasn't nowhere near Hanley's ranch all that time," went on Broken Nose.

"When you woke us up with a gun in our ribs at sunup you was the first man we seen in three weeks."

THE story was flawless. Sheriff Callahan had listened to it a dozen times already that morning. There were many other details, all delivered in the same fashion, like the class repeating a history lesson at the little school back in Cholla. He was not the least bit curious about the rest of it; what he wanted was a different story—the truth.

He had forced the pair to sit before him this way in the increasing heat for hours. Question after question he had put to them, like the unceasing drop of water which will wear away solid rock, but their mental resistance proved adamant to any attack. He had denied them water, drinking it sparingly but tantalizingly himself; yet these men had the iron endurance of desert dwellers to a greater degree even than he.

Sheriff Callahan rose to his feet, his knees a bit stiff from the hours without movement. He picked up the extra guns. "Come on," he ordered. "We're goin' in."

The two looked at each other. "Goin' in?" repeated Broken Nose. "You can't take us in. We ain't done nothin'." There was suppressed consternation in the tone. It did not escape Sheriff Callahan.

"I can do anything, being out on Desolation Flat and holding the only six-gun," he said. "I can shoot you two and leave you, and you'll be clean bones in two days. Nobody need know—except those who'd reelect me on the strength of it. You comin' in?"

Broken Nose looked at Scar Mouth. But Scar Mouth continued to stare at the sheriff. Then he grinned with a crookedness accentuated by his disfigurement. "Don't waste your time bluffin' me, Sheriff Callahan. We're goin' in. You couldn't keep us away after this business you been handin' us. We're goin' in to clear our names of this charge of a murder we never even knew was committed."

As Callahan walked to the horses he grinned ironically in turn. The fellow was an able foeman. He had seen straight through that bluff. And more than that, he had taken the sheriff's most powerful weapon, resistance to arrest, clean out of his hands.

THEY rode over the barren miles of Desolation Flat in silence, the pair side by side, the sheriff a little behind, his rifle held in the crook of his arm, the pack horses trailing. The horses moved at little better than a walk. The men themselves were being drained of their innermost strength by the heat that gathered with terrible intensity in this great basin. Far off to the left the dust devils danced in the sun. Ahead the blue mesas were distorted in the shimmering haze.

Sheriff Callahan watched the pair through eyelids which contracted with many tiny wrinkles to mere slits. Men did not come willingly into this sort of country; not men of their stamp. They were riders. Cowboys nominally, but gamblers, gunmen, killers, when chance and sufficient profit gave them the opportunity.

As Sheriff Callahan reconstructed the events of the past two weeks he felt sure that such an opportunity had presented itself to them at the beginning of that interval. It was a simple enough affair, except that conclusive evidence was lacking.

An unexpected order had come from the State Board closing the doors of the bank at Cholla. Three days later they had reopened, but meantime Pete Hanley had demanded and received two thousand, two hundred dollars in gold for beef sold in the loading pens. From this he had paid his hands and given them all a holiday. From this also, so that any observer would know the gold was in his possession, he had treated the crowd in town. Late that night he had mounted his horse and ridden home alone. Twenty-four hours later, when the first of his men arrived at the ranch to nurse his sick head, Pete Hanley was found dead in his doorway, riddled with bullets as he obviously had come out to answer a hail. The gold was nowhere to be found.

The western sheriff—the typical, efficient kind of officer who held his job for years, that is—never waited for overwhelming evidence in any one direction before going into action. In a land of hot tempers and cool gun hands a good hunch was worth a dozen poor clues. Sheriff Callahan more than once had saddled his horse within five minutes of the news of a crime, gone after his man, and brought him in with a complete confession.

The legal evidence was hopelessly meager. No one knew definitely when the pair had been in town last. No one recalled with any certainty seeing them the night of the gold payment. The bullets that killed Hanley were .44s. Smith and Regan carried frontier model .44s. But by a process of elimination, beyond these inconclusive facts, and by a sifting of probabilities whose weight the sheriff alone could judge, they became the logical men to find. In Sheriff Callahan's mind was the conviction, the almost intuitive certainty, that if these men would talk the affair would be a mystery no longer.

It was his job to make them talk.

The country changed. They passed through a section of rough land, still barren, but broken up into arroyos and dry water courses. The horses increased their gait as they realized the proximity of the country beyond, where grew pinon and grass and where sweet springs were to be found. Soon they began to climb and gradually the desert was left behind them. They went on, mile after mile.

OVER this trail during relentless hours Sheriff Callahan had followed Tip Smith and Rosy Regan; hours which had become days before he crept upon them in the grayness of dawn and made them his prisoners. The tracks of their saddle horses and pack pony had wandered without apparent plan over miles of every variety of country. Over lava beds, along creeks up in the range, by way of barren rimrock—and never once had he deviated from their erratic path. He had not been deceived. Men out for peaceful purposes might require weeks to create such a trail.

They had taken days only, and though often the sheriff had followed by sheer dependence on an indescribable sixth sense, he read in the few signs they left the haste which moved them, the alibi they planned in the remote event of trouble, the distorted cunning of their minds. Prospecting! Those two riders, who scorned even the habiliments of that profession! Prospecting indeed, but not for minerals.

Late that afternoon the trio arrived at the ranch-house of Matt Dolan, set in the shadow of a mighty canyon which opened on a mesa of countless miles of burnt grass and sage. The dour Matt himself viewed them from the door as they approached. The horses were worn out; they stood with heads down in abject weariness as the trio halted; even the pack horse drooped. The men were dusty, lined of face, slumped in their saddles. Rosy Regan, he of the battered nose, stared at his saddle horn sullenly. Tip Smith eyed old Dolan with a hint of challenge. Sheriff Tim Callahan slid out of the saddle stiffly and gratefully.

"Howdy, Callahan," greeted Dolan. He said no more; his blue eyes watched but gave no hint of any undue interest in the visitors.

"'Lo, Matt. I'm asking you to put us up for the night. We're pretty well done out."

"They your prisoners?" demanded Matt. He ignored the slight ironic shrug this won from Tip Smith. Rosy snapped his head up at the sound of the words.

"Yeah. We just come off the Flat," the sheriff said. He pulled off his hat and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "We'll go on to Cholla in the morning."

"Stay as long as you like." Dolan, short, gray of hair, tight lipped, studied the prisoners a moment. His eyes gleamed with some sudden inner fire. "They look familiar, Tim," he said. "Are they in for—"

"They are."

The eyes of the two old-timers met and exchanged a message that each man understood. No need to put into words what it said. It was partly grim satisfaction, and partly grim challenge. Pete Hanley had been the friend of every man in that country. Having caught his murderers, very likely the sheriff had an even harder job ahead to guard them from the summary vengeance of those friends.

"I'd put them up in the harness room in the barn," Dolan said evenly. "The window is barred and the walls are solid planks."

"That'll do for one. How about the other. You have a cellar, haven't you?"

"A bit of a one. Keeping 'em apart? It'll do."

A man emerged from the barn just then and headed for the bunkhouse, carrying a wrench and a length of wire. He caught sight of the group before the house and stopped dead. Then he dropped the things in his hands and, breaking into a run, disappeared into the bunkhouse. In half a minute he reappeared. About his middle, previously unencumbered, a gun belt now hung. Casually he sauntered toward the house.

Dolan allowed a tight little grin to touch his mouth. "Quit stallin' Tod," he called to the puncher. "Come here and take these horses."

The puncher advanced quickly. He merely nodded to the sheriff; all his attention was for the two who still sat in their saddles, and he eyed them with cool inscrutability.

"Off," he ordered succinctly. He took the four bridles and hastened toward the barn with the unprotesting animals before the pair were fairly afoot.

"You take that one to the barn," directed Dolan brusquely. "I'll put this fella away. Or—wait a minute." He turned and entered the house.

"We want to eat, Sheriff," protested Tip Smith. He faced the officer squarely. "We never resisted you. We're as good as comin' in of our own free will. I'll bet this ain't legal anyway. You ain't showed us no warrant."

"Warrants!" The officer chuckled grimly. "It won't be a warrant you'll be looking for when the news gets around that I've brought you in." He stared meaningly at the hard-eyed Smith. "There's many a rope going to ride with a hangman's noose tomorrow. Bear that in mind. It won't be you I'll have to guard."

DOLAN came through the door buckling his gun belt around his middle. "All right, Callahan; head for the barn. I'll be right after you, when I've put this 'un away." He spoke curtly to Smith. "Come on. Inside."

Tip Smith stood firm. "I'm goin' to eat before I get shut up anywhere. I got my rights. I ain't goin' to be hounded." His voice was dogged.

Dolan glanced at the sheriff. "Tim, am I deputized?" he asked.

"Well—" Callahan hesitated. "You understand what that means, Matt?"

"I do. While I'm deputy nobody but you gives me orders. If I undeputize myself I'll give you fair warnin'."

"You're a deputy then."

Instantly the stocky figure of the rancher left the step of the doorway. He was before the defiant Tip Smith, his square jaw thrust at the man. "Fella," he said, "did I hear you speak?"

The gunman was a little taken aback, but he rallied and returned the glare. "You did. And if you try any rough stuff I'll make it hot for you."

Dolan's left hand gripped the slender shoulder of the man before him. The gun rose out of the holster in the other hand. "How did you get that scar, Tip Smith?" he asked. He lifted the barrel of the gun before Smith's eyes. "You see that front sight. It's filed. I can rip your other cheek open. I can break your jaw doing it so that you'll not find talk so easy."

There were little flushed spots on the pale cheeks of Tip Smith. Matt Dolan was a silent man. Rarely did he utter threats; never did he boast. Smith was a clever man himself, and he knew enough to be afraid. "Sheriff," he said, "take this man off me. Take him off me."

"All right, Matt." Sheriff Callahan spoke quietly. "Put Regan away. I'll take care of this fellow."

Without a word Dolan replaced the gun and returned to the door, his hand ordering Regan to precede him within. He ignored Smith. Tip breathed deeply and the fires of deep anger and hate burned in his eyes as he glanced after Dolan. But he walked ahead of Callahan toward the barn without further protest.

Ten minutes later, both prisoners safely behind walls, Dolan and the sheriff walked back to the house from the barn. They were silent, but as they stopped beside the door they exchanged a glance of mutual appraisal. It was perhaps of mutual understanding too, for Tim Callahan spoke with no trace of mental reservation. "I'm going to count on you, Matt. I got a hard job ahead of me. These fellows won't talk. I've got to make 'em talk."

"I've seen it done," returned Dolan.

"I got an idee you've done it." There was a light of grim humor behind the weariness in Callahan's eyes. "Come on inside. I got some talkin' to do myself."

AN HOUR later the four men sat about the table in Dolan's kitchen. The pair had been released for supper. It was a typical bachelor ranch kitchen, clean if disorderly, and the very disorder was simply a man's indifference to feminine niceties in housekeeping. The stove at one end of the room was hot and savory with the odor of stew, and on the cracked red oilcloth of the table were dishes and utensils of strictly utilitarian character. The four busied themselves at the food.

Once or twice Sheriff Callahan glanced up from his plate to peer out the open door. It was deepening twilight outside and quiet. At last he spoke. "Matt, where's that rider of yours?"

Dolan glanced up from his plate. "Him? I dunno." His eyes dropped again. The other two paid no attention.

"Huh!" The sheriff gave a low sound of uncertainty. "He usually eats here with you, don't he?"

"Yep."

"Nobody else around now, is there?"

"No."

There was a moment of silence. Then the sheriff addressed the rancher again and his voice was hard. "Matt Dolan, go and find that man."

Slowly Dolan's eyes rose and met those of the sheriff. "Why?"

"Go and find him."

"You speakin' as sheriff?"

"I am."

Dolan shoved back his chair and walked to the door. His voice rose. "Oh, Blaine! Tod Blaine!" There came no reply, and Dolan set out in search.

Some minutes later he returned. He walked directly to his place at the table and sat down. "Tod's gone," he said.

Sheriff Callahan stood abruptly on his feet and his hand fell on his gun butt. "Damn it, Matt Dolan," he burst out, afire with suspicion, "are you double crossin' me?"

Dolan's voice was surprisingly mild for a man of his temper. "Of course not, Tim. Sit down. Why should I lie about that. I dunno where Blaine went. He's gone off somewhere, that's all."

"Without his supper, eh? That sounds natural."

While the sheriff and the rancher stared at each other in this sudden outburst, the subdued pair on either side of the table laid down knife and fork and watched. Tip Smith's eyes darted between each of the men and his lips tightened with grim appreciation. Rosy Regan listened with the covert puzzlement of a slower witted man, and he found no food for satisfaction in this development. Rather, it seemed, he found more to unsettle nerves which had not improved during his hour alone in the darkness of the cellar. Rosy had caught the full significance of Callahan's reference to the nooses that would be riding on the morrow. He had seen them ride before, and Rosy Regan was scared.

Dolan was speaking. "I ain't responsible for whether or not my men eat, am I?"

"No," assured the sheriff, "you're not. But what was it you two had to talk about so earnest before? You quit soon as I came out. You're smart, Matt Dolan. You gave your word to help me guard these men as deputy. But that didn't stop you from sendin' Blaine to town for a mob—and when the mob holds you up with Winchesters it won't stop you from surrenderin' to them peaceful, will it?"

Dolan, for all his dour mask of a face, was suddenly alert and cautious. "I'm admittin' nothing, Sheriff Callahan. I'll do my duty as far as I can."

The sheriff glared for a full minute in suppressed fury. Then he drew his hand from the gun and sat down. He had no more to say. He resumed eating, savagely.

Smith and Regan watched him. The meaning of the sheriff's charge struck home with them. They had failed to perceive Dolan's dodge, but its grim evasion of duty had not escaped the sheriff. There was trouble ahead surely. Rosy lost his appetite and his unskilled efforts to roll a cigaret betrayed an agitation he strove mightily to conceal. Tip Smith, after a couple of half hearted attacks on the remainder of his meal, thrust it from him with an oath and yanked out his tobacco sack. But Tip Smith spilled no tobacco, and the match was held to the end of the cigaret with even firmness. His lips bore a faint sneer. Whether it was for his captor, or Dolan, or his shaken partner, he gave no sign.

DAYLIGHT disappeared and the ranch lay in darkness. A moon came up out of the east later and cast a dim sort of light on a silent world. It shone on the ranchhouse and the great spread of bunch grass and scattered sage about it with an intensity unknown in atmospheres of lesser clarity. It shone on the ranch doorstep, and on the two men who sat there with glowing pipes.

Sheriff Callahan fought the exhaustion which threatened to overwhelm him. The ordeal of the past week had exacted its cost; no longer was he the untiring, steel nerved young man he had been. But he held on grimly. He had a job to do.

He rose to his feet, knocking out the dottle of his pipe against his palm. "I'm going to get to work," he announced.

Dolan reached for the lantern at his feet and struck a match. When the wick was burning steadily he rose and led the way to the barn. He offered no speech, simply walking straight through the big door directly to the smaller inner one which was secured with a padlock. This he opened with a key.

The room was small. The walls were decorated with hanging sets of harness, and saddles rested on trees beneath them. Tip Smith stood beside the barred window, and he regarded them with a half sneering, half watchful gaze. The sheriff approached him and came straight to the point. "I'm through foolin' with you, Smith," he said in an edged voice. In the weak light the faces of the two, inches apart, were fantastic in the shadows. "Come clean."

"You want to hear our story again? I'll tell it."

"No. You can tell it to yourself—while you're waiting for the rope at Raeburn. I got hanging evidence against you now. You know why I want a confession. I've saved the county and state a couple of hundred thousand in my time. I'm going to save them the expense of a fought trial now as well."

"I got a right to a trial," declared Smith. "You can't make me talk." His voice rose in sudden passion. "By cripes, I'll skin you alive for this when the court throws your case out, Callahan. I told you my story. I'm through."

The sheriff's voice was even. "No, you're not, Tip Smith." It was passionless, with the terrible weight of implacable justice behind it. "You got a long way to go, Tip Smith, and it leads to a little cell at Raeburn. You're going to hear them nail up the scaffold in the prison yard. You're going to see the shadow of it on the yard pavement in the sunlight. You're not going to be able to sleep at night for the way that shadow will haunt you in the moonlight. Tip Smith—"

"Damn you!" said the prisoner. His voice was low and edged with hate. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone, I tell you. I didn't do any killing."

"You lie," said Callahan harshly.

Smith smothered the oath that rose to his lips.

"You—*lie!*" repeated the sheriff.

With effort Smith controlled himself, his lean dark face quiet once more. "All right. What you goin' to do about it!" His face was even inscrutable, for Smith had a high order of cunning and a hard man's courage.

"Remember, Smith, if you testify—" The sheriff allowed his meaning to be inferred.

Smith sneered. "What kinda fella d'you think I am, Sheriff? Me peach on a pal—even that tub of tallow?"

"Then only loyalty holds you back?"

"Who said so? I ain't killed anybody. That's my story."

"Good enough." Sheriff Callahan turned abruptly from Smith and walked out of the room. Dolan picked up the lantern and followed. The lock snapped shut in the hasp and the two walked out of the barn.

"Score one for Smith," said Dolan.

IN THE blackness of his cellar jail the only ray of light that penetrated to Rosy Regan came through the thin crack in the trapdoor above him, reflected from the lamp on the kitchen table. He had heard the footsteps of the two men, and their voices, though he was only able to distinguish words when, as happened a couple of times, they were raised in anger and denial. For some time now there had been silence, and Rosy reflected.

Sheriff Callahan was nervous. Rosy could well sense that. When a fella like that hard bitten old-timer Callahan got nervous there was usually good cause. Rosy felt uncomfortable along his spine, and he rose to walk about his tiny cell. They had no right to keep a fella in a chilly place like this!

Light blazed abruptly in his eyes, and he blinked in the glare of a lantern as the trapdoor rose. Callahan was carrying the lantern, and behind him came Dolan.

Rosy Regan stared at them suspiciously as they descended the steps into the cellar. He was curled up on a pile of sacking and he leaned on his elbow as they approached him. The sheriff kicked over the wooden box to a position beside him and sat down.

"Regan," he began, "you're in a bad fix."

"Which is your fault," protested Rosy. "You got the whole damn' county probably thinkin' I killed this here Hanley! It ain't fair."

"Well, maybe it ain't at that," the sheriff admitted. "That is, providin' you actually didn't do any killin'."

"I didn't!" reiterated the prisoner.

"Personally, I got an idee you're telling the truth. But I got to have proof of that just the same."

"I tell yuh we was prospectin' over—"

"You're a liar!" thundered Callahan unexpectedly. Rosy Regan quailed. Callahan went on, "By God, if I hear another word about prospectin' I'll turn you over to Dolan's riders."

"You can't do that, Sheriff. God Almighty!"

"Pete Hanley was my friend, d'you hear?" Callahan demanded, thrusting his face at the prisoner. "I'd do anything to square things with his killer. I'm talkin' to you because I know you ain't got the guts to kill a man. Now who killed Hanley?"

At that direct question a crafty light came over the fear in Regan's eyes. The sheriff was playing the old game again. It was talk he wanted. Well, Rosy could play that game any day.

"I don't know," he said. "You got my story." His eyes defied Callahan's glare.

"Regan, you're getting your last chance," warned Callahan. "I'm willin' to believe you didn't do the shootin', but if we have to prove it on the two of you—and I got hangin' evidence, mind—then both of you hang together."

But Rosy trusted the cunning of Tip Smith and his own good luck. "I got nothing to talk about, Sheriff. Tough luck, ain't it." He essayed a grin. His courage came back with a rush now; even the threat of Dolan's "mob" seemed far away while the sheriff was present.

"All right, Regan," Callahan said. His voice was ominous. "You've had your chance. We don't care about you. We just wanted to hear your story before we got to work on Smith. Smith is goin' to talk."

"Try an' make him!" taunted Regan.

"We are. There are ways of makin' a man tell things, Regan, and be thankful we aren't usin' them on you."

A little of Regan's assurance evaporated at this. He had heard tales of those tough old Indian fighters, tales that made a man's flesh creep. A premonition that all would not be well assailed Regan and he had nothing more to say.

"Come on, Dolan." Sheriff Callahan turned and went up the stairs.

THAT was the beginning of a nightmare for Rosy Regan. He tried to grin to himself as the two men left him, and in a measure he succeeded. He felt safe, there was nothing to worry about; yet he would have given much for a chance to talk it over with Tip Smith again. Smith was a clever bird; he knew his way around these things. He knew what fellas were hintin' at when they spoke of ways of makin' a man talk, for instance.

Regan rolled himself a cigaret and reflected over the smoke. His thoughts were deep ones; deep for him; and they took a long time to get around troublesome points. The cigaret burned down to a stub and he ground it under his heel. He lay down on his back and stared up into the darkness.

Then suddenly he leaped to his feet with one terrified spring and stood motionless while a chill wind seemed to blow over his face. What was that? A scream? He listened intently, but not a sound fell on his ears.

Then it came again. It *was* a scream! The far off terror in it froze Rosy's very blood. The awful sound rose, sustained this time until it reached a pitch of unendurable agony. In the silence that came when it halted Rosy Regan sat down. He did so quickly, for his knees were strangely weak.

Good God! They had meant what they said! They were torturing a man. That man was Tip Smith. They were getting a story out of him.

A double cause for fright came with that. What sort of story would torture make Tip Smith tell? The sheriff had said that he, Rosy, had been given his last chance. They weren't interested in him—said they had hanging evidence on him already. Said that no matter now who did the killing he, Rosy, would hang too.

Supposin'—just supposin'—Tip Smith hung the deadwood on Rosy Regan!

FULLY half an hour passed. Regan sat in his corner, staring through the darkness at the spot above him where the first gleams of light would appear when the door was opened. He did not move, scarcely could his even breathing be heard in the heavy silence of the underground room.

Footsteps crossed the floor above. Voices, an indistinguishable drone of words, came to him. The trapdoor was flung upward. There was a pause; then the dusty boots of Callahan came down the steps, followed by the lantern and the whole of the sheriff himself. Dolan was behind him.

There were lines of terrible strain on their faces as they studied the man on the pile of sacking. Regan in turn eyed them with the glare of a trapped animal.

"It's too late, Regan," the sheriff announced grimly.

Regan did not speak. His glance traveled over both of his captors. The lantern, resting on the floor, cast its light strongly on their boots and overalls while their upper bodies and faces were in distorted, grotesque shadows. Regan's gaze halted on the sheriff's boots and remained there. His eyes grew wider and his mouth opened slightly; a tiny choking sound came from his throat.

Callahan looked down. Then his own mouth became thin and cruel and he picked up a faded flour sack beside Regan. With this he wiped at the place where Regan stared, a wet gleaming spot on the dust of his boots. The white cloth came away vivid. It was red, scarlet, the color of blood.

"God!" said Regan hoarsely.

Callahan's voice was harsh now. "Did you hear us, Regan?"

Rosy Regan backed against the wall and soundless words formed on his lips. Horror such as few men see was in his eyes. His left hand pulled at the collar of his shirt until the button snapped off. His right hand remained where it was, hidden in the shadows behind his body.

"Tip Smith talked, Regan."

Still the prisoner did not speak. He seemed to have lost control of his vocal cords. Yet he did not grovel. Transfixed with horror and fright though he was, the basic elements of his nature, the essential criminal in him, steeled him to defiance even in this direst of extremities.

He found speech. Curses, more foul than common men are wont to hear, let alone utter, came from his lips, The very depths of obscenity in him rose to the surface.

Dolan pressed forward. "He knows how to talk, Sheriff Callahan," the rancher said. The words came as a request, cruel and eager. A rope he had been carrying suddenly uncoiled at Dolan's feet. "Let me persuade him. He'll tell more. Look at him; he's soft." Dolan's teeth gleamed in the lantern light. "The steel will bite, Sheriff—"

"You come near me," grated the victim, "you come near me an' I'll kill you. I'll kill you—"

"Stop, Dolan!" snapped the sheriff in an unnerved voice. "Regan," he said, turning on the prisoner, "I've got the story. You killed Hanley. You stood beside the door while Smith called him out. He confessed. He talked to Hanley while you held a gun to him, and you pulled the trigger without giving him a chance."

"You lie!" screamed the tortured man. "He lies! He killed him. I wanted to hit Hanley and knock him out. Smith said he would. He shot him instead. *He* shot him; *he* shot him, I tell you!"

The sheriff whirled about. "Dolan, give me that paper and pen." From the step behind him the rancher produced the materials for formal confession. Callahan kicked up the box beside the lantern and uncorked the ink bottle. He dipped the pen and held it poised. "Start from the beginning," he demanded of Regan.

Rosy Regan sat immobile against the wall. He was trapped and suddenly he realized it. During the frenzy that possesssed him he had blurted words in self-defense which turned out to be words of suicide. Whether he fastened the crime on Smith or not, as an accessory to murder he stood to hang.

A mist swam before the eyes of Rosy Regan, a red blinding madness. He was on his feet, scrambling suddenly. In his hand a narrow gleaming thing was borne before him. Dolan, crouching, waiting, leaped silently. The two men met and were thrown over. There was a shot, and the acrid fumes of powder smoke filled the cellar.

Rosy Regan wilted. He was under the burly strength of Dolan, and the powerful arms gripped him, held him helplessly now that he ceased to fight. "Let me up," he whimpered. "I'm licked."

Dolan moved his bulk, releasing him. The rancher's hand clutched his shirt collar, forcing him to rise to his feet. In Dolan's other hand was the long, sharp-pointed file which Regan had found and appropriated for a weapon. Dolan looked at it, looked at Regan. Abruptly the hand released the file, the fist clenched and swung. There was a crack of flesh and bone and Regan landed in a heap in the corner. He lay there moaning.

"YOU all right, Dolan?" Sheriff Callahan, gun in hand, gazed anxiously in the rancher's face.

"All sound." Dolan breathed deeply. "But he'd have got you, fella, holding that dinky pen and expectin' talk. I looked for action. It came."

Callahan stirred Regan in the ribs with the barrel of the gun. "Out of that," he ordered. "You're not shot. I aimed at the floor. Come on, out of that!"

Regan sat up, shrinking from the gun and staring at the sheriff with dazed eyes.

"Now you'll talk, I expect," continued Callahan. He righted the box, salvaged the little ink left in the overturned bottle and prepared again to write. "Start. From the beginning."

Regan shook his head to clear it. He felt his jaw, which already began to swell from the blow. He winced.

"I'm waiting," barked the sheriff.

Regan stared at the officer. His being was drained of all desire to fight. An apathy fell on him, but it was a dogged apathy none the less. It was that of the mean and cunning of mankind, the fatalism of suffering. Rosy had been goaded beyond fear.

"I won't talk any more," he said in a low voice.

Instantly Dolan was before him, fist drawn back. "—— blast you, you white livered, crawling skunk—*talk!*"

"Smith talked," Regan said defiantly. He shrank back against the wall, but did not lift a hand to fend the threatened blow. "His story is enough. I don't care any more. I'm through."

The sheriff looked at Dolan and a wordless message was exchanged. If they were disappointed they did not show it. Callahan rose, picked up the lantern. Dolan squinted thoughtfully up at the trapdoor. He took out his watch, looked at it. Then, with deliberateness, he drew his gun from the holster and fired two rapid shots at the floor, paused, then two more.

Sheriff Callahan dropped the lantern. His own gun flew from the leather and was pressed into the small of Dolan's back. The rancher gave a start of consternation, but the sheriff's move had been like a flash of lightning—quicker even than the alertness of a man with a gun in his hands.

"What did that mean, Dolan. Tell me quick."

Dolan did not answer. He was listening, staring up through the trapdoor. As if in answer to the shots, a series of shrill cries rose from outside the house. They came from all sides, cries of exultation, touched with the lust of the man hunt. The mob had come.

"Drop that gun!" snapped the sheriff. "You double-crossing sidewinder, I'll see you in hell for this!" he grated. "Before they get this fella I'm going to shoot you myself."

Dolan released the gun. But he grinned with ironic satisfaction. "They'll get Smith," he said. "They can wait till this one agrees to come out by himself." His voice took on a timbre of passion. "I'll wait till my bones rot if you try stickin' it out down here. But *he'll* give way before us. He's going to beg to go up—even with what's waitin' for him up there."

Callahan retrieved the fallen pistol, but he sat down on the upturned box limp with infinite weariness. He looked like a man who had suddenly been licked. His head drooped and his face was lost in shadow, Dolan watched him, smiling ironically.

Regan was sitting up again. "Sheriff," he whispered, "Sheriff, is that—" The words did not form.

Callahan looked at him. "Yes, it is. It means I got to turn you over to a cowardly pack of hounds. I can't save you." He hesitated a moment. Then he went on with the apathy of hopelessness, "Perhaps they're right anyway. I dunno. I never lost a prisoner to a mob yet, but often I felt like lettin' them take a prisoner off my hands. Prisoners that would talk their way out of the noose; killers that would lie and swear somebody's life away to save their own—"

"Hey, down there!" cried a voice from above. "Who's there?"

Callahan leaped to his feet, kicking the lantern over so that it went out, plunging the cellar in darkness. "I'm here," he shouted in reply, "Sheriff Callahan; and the first man comes down those steps stops a bullet in his guts."

"Better drop your gun and get it over with, Sheriff," argued the voice mildly. The speaker was concealed from view; he stood in the kitchen out of range. "We got the whole place surrounded. You can't get away and you can't fight all of us for the sake of a couple of rats like them fellas."

CALLAHAN did not reply. None of the three men in the cellar moved. The speaker above continued. "We got Smith already. We been gumshoein' around ever since you went down there. We had to wait a long time out in the darkness before you let up on Smith and tackled the other one." There came a chuckle. "You did a good job on Smith. Wish we could have helped. His hair is turnin' white already."

A queer sound came out of the darkness in the corner of the cellar. From another corner came a grim chuckle.

"How about it, Sheriff?" the voice insisted.

"I told you what I'd do," Callahan said doggedly.

"All right," the voice submitted. "Think it over a while." The trapdoor creaked as it was swung down. It paused midway. "I think we'll dispose of Smith in the meantime, Sheriff. That'll save so much time when we get hold of your friend down there." The trapdoor closed with a thud.

A match flared in the sheriff's hand, and he righted the lantern. The flame filled the cellar once more with its yellow glow. Callahan looked at Regan and there was almost sympathy in his expression. "Well, fella," he said, "you cooked your goose now proper, and mine too. If I'd had a confession from you to show that gang I might have been able to talk 'em out of the idea. Or mebbe if they insisted on a hangin' they would have been satisfied with Tip Smith."

"You ain't gonna let 'em get me, Sheriff?" It was the plea of one who dares not let himself see the obvious answer. Regan was suddenly full of the love of life. With the helplessness of the sheriff demonstrated, and the imminence of death so brutally clear, his apathy completely deserted him.

"How in hell can I stop 'em?" demanded Callahan. "Think I'm gonna risk my hide to save that polluted thing you call your life? You had your chance to save it by unloading on Smith. Turning state's evidence might have saved you. Now, even if I get you out alive, you'll surely hang. They won't let you turn the guilt on Smith, with Smith dead."

"But—cripes!" Regan gasped, and a torrent of words followed. "I'll confess! I'll tell the whole story. You can take it to those fellas up-stairs and show 'em I didn't do any killing. I'll go to the pen for life—for God's sake, give me a chance, Sheriff! Gimme a chance, for the love o' God!"

"Stop your blubbering!" shouted Callahan. Yet as Rosy abruptly subsided he turned away and seemed to consider the offer. Regan watched him, breathless. Sound came from above in the silence: footsteps about the house, a burst of shots, muffled, from outside, shouts and cries. None of them conveyed any hint of precisely what was going on above, but all of them were pregnant with tragedy.

Callahan turned and faced Regan. "I'll try it," he announced. "But you got to tell the truth. One lie—and it'll be discovered—and I'll swear your life away myself. Get started." He recovered the writing materials once more on the box, drew the lantern close, and bent to the task.

Rosy Regan talked at last.

THE ranch-house kitchen was full of men. A large double-wick lamp with reflector was suspended from the ceiling; on the table were two smaller lamps; and every man's face was etched clearly against the darker shadows of the bare wooden walls. They all turned toward Sheriff Callahan, who sat at the table as one presiding at a court.

He had been talking. In his hand was a paper covered with writing. His gaze traveled about the room from man to man, but each one's face was a mask.

"Bring up Regan," Callahan ordered. A man sitting cross-legged on the trapdoor rose and pulled it upward.

"Up-stairs, Rosy!"

There was a stir in the darkness of the cellar. Regan's boots echoed hollowly on the steps and then his head appeared, his hair disheveled and face drawn of blood. He paused uncertainly at the top.

"Sit down over there," ordered the sheriff. He indicated a vacant chair against one wall, and Regan moved toward it, seating himself between two lean, bronzed faced riders.

"I been talkin' to these men, Regan. I'm going to read your confession to them. You will tell them whether it is the truth or not."

Regan nodded, moistening his lips.

The sheriff rustled the paper. He began to read. "I, Dan Regan, known as Rosy, of my own accord and without coercion, do hereby confess to being an accessory in the murder of Pete Hanley on the night of June 10th last. On that day I was with Tip Smith in Cholla—"

The sheriff droned on. The confession

told a sordid story of greed aroused by the sight of Hanley's gold, of half drunken plotting to acquire it, of Regan's reluctance to enter upon so bald a crime, of Smith's arguments and cunning foresight. It told of Smith's agreement to use the butt of his gun on the head of Hanley as the rancher came to the door, and narrated the cold-blooded murder that occurred instead. After robbing the dead man and searching the house, the pair had galloped off in the darkness and headed for the badlands, where they expected their tracks would be lost on the lava beds and their alibi perfected until it would be safe to return. It told a story of Smith the tempter and Rosy the reluctant accomplice.

Sheriff Callahan paused, staring reflectively at Regan. The man sat with head sunk on his breast. The sheriff spoke. "All this is your true confession, Regan?"

Rosy nodded.

"Speak up, man!"

Rosy lifted his head. "Yes," he said huskily, "it's all true."

"All right. Now stand up. Come over here and face me. I want to read the concluding words to you directly."

Regan walked across the kitchen floor until he was before the table, facing the sheriff. Callahan's eyes held his gaze. There was a slight stir behind him, a scuffing of feet, then silence. Regan cringed slightly, as though expecting some new and unknown form of punishment, but he did not turn about. The slender hope of life afforded by the confession held him immobile, staring at Callahan.

"I claim innocence of intent or act in the death of Pete Hanley," read the sheriff slowly, his finger marking the words at the bottom of the paper. "I do charge that the bullets which killed Hanley were fired from a gun in the hands of Tip Smith, and that the said Smith is guilty of murder."

Silence again, oppressive and ominous. Regan's forehead was gleaming with perspiration. A great fear was on him; something terrible was imminent that he could not understand.

SOME one spoke. Low and surcharged with passion, a voice crept into the stillness on words of indescribable hate. "And may you rot in hell, you dirty, double crossin' skunk!" it closed.

Regan whirled—and clutched at the table as he shrank from the hatred in Tip Smith's eyes. The killer stood inside the door, whence he had been brought by two impassive riders, unharmed, untouched, no marks of violence on his face, no sign of blanched hair on his head.

"Good God!" whispered Rosy Regan. His hand went out as though to reassure himself of the reality of the man before him.

"Pray, you rotten-hearted dog!" went on the killer. His voice was low pitched, muted by the weight of passion it bore. "I been listening to everything that happened here for the last hour. I was gagged, but I could listen. I heard them tellin' you things—and I heard you fall for them like the yellow cur you are."

"But they said—" Rosy began in agony. "The blood—"

"They said I talked—and you believed them. They smeared beef blood on a boot—and you blubbered. I'll talk now, all right. I'll tell them how you was so scared that night that you shot Hanley without waitin' to slug him. Yes, *you*—you dog! And they'll believe me."

"I—I didn't" But stark fear transfixed him; he turned and read his doom—or what seemed so to him—in the grim faces. "I did, —— blast you!" he shouted hoarsely. "But you made me! You made me, an' you'll hang for it!" He paused; then with an inarticulate, animal cry he threw himself on Smith.

Tip Smith had been smiling slightly, crookedly; standing with feet apart, his hands bound behind his back. His eyes had grown narrow and the muscles of his legs seemed to tighten visibly under his overalls. Suddenly, even as Rosy leaped, he leaned forward and heaved on the cords which temporarily encircled his wrists. His slim hands slipped through the frail bonds and were free. Like a coiled spring he crouched, beneath the frenzied onslaught of Regan, snatched at the gun in the holster of the man beside him. There was an explosion, muffled between the bodies.

Every man in the room was on his feet, and both Smith and Regan went down beneath the surge of men. Sheriff Callahan's voice roared above the turmoil. "Get his gun and get off him! Get away, damn you all for fools!" He waded into the mass and pulled aside the plunging bodies that smothered the killer. The men retreated.

Tip Smith, dazed from a blow, rested on

all fours, shaking his head. Regan lay on his back, motionless, awkward of limb. On his blue flannel shirt a sodden dark patch spread. Already the whites of his eyes gleamed horribly in a stare of death. Tip Smith had taken his revenge.

No man spoke as Tip Smith lurched to his feet. He stared down at his victim and suddenly he laughed. "You son of a coyote, you'll tell no more stories!"

"We don't need any now, Smith," Sheriff Callahan said grimly.

THE killer straightened up and his eyes grew hard as the clouds of passion and shock evaporated from his brain. "It was self-defense; you saw it," he said. Then sardonically, "You gonna hang me here?"

"You know well we're not." The sheriff looked at the sober faced men about him. They watched him, passive, no sign of insubordination on them. "This dress rehearsal we put on tonight turned out to be a real performance, men," Callahan continued with the timbre of regret in his voice. "I'm thankful for your help. I'm specially thankful to Matt Dolan for letting his house be used like this. I'm thankful to Tod Blaine for goin' after you all for me. I could never have gotten a story from these two without your help. But I'm sorry as your sheriff that I let another killin' happen."

"Don't bother," a voice responded dryly. "We don't need thanks for straightenin' out the killin' of Pete Hanley—and we ain't so sorry for Rosy either."

"Sheriff," spoke up Tip Smith. He eyed the officer calculatingly. "D'you think you got the story straight? Are you sure who killed Pete Hanley?"

Callahan nodded.

"You heard what Rosy said?" insisted Smith.

"I did."

"Then you know without my tellin' you that it was him that did it?"

"I know that Rosy Regan shot Pete Hanley," admitted the sheriff. The men in the kitchen listened, puzzled. Smith sighed softly, and his eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"Smith," continued the sheriff, "I'll tell you exactly what happened." His hand drew from a trouser pocket two small lead pellets and played with them as he talked. "You both waited at Hanley's door for him to come out. You both had guns ready. You had worked on Regan's nerves till he was badly scared. He got rattled. You said something that scared him further as Hanley appeared, and Regan opened fire. Ain't that so?"

Smith listened, narrow of eye, wary for a trap, and he gave no answer.

"Regan shot Hanley," went on Callahan, "but not one bullet lodged in a fatal spot. The bullet in his heart was the one that killed him. And that bullet was the only shot you fired."

"That ain't so!" declared Tip Smith. "You know Regan was lyin', tryin' to cover up his own guilt. He hung himself!"

"Regan was a weak sister, Smith," said Callahan. "He thought one of you was to hang; the other could go free. He tried to go free. But if he failed, he was going to take you with him."

"Listen here, Sheriff, I'll go to the pen for robbery, or for this—" Smith nodded scornfully at the body on the floor— "but I didn't kill Hanley."

"You're goin' to stick to that story, are you?"

"I am."

"All right." The sheriff held up one of the pellets in his hand. "Now this bullet was taken from the body of Pete Hanley. It is one of three the autopsy found just like it. Each one weighs just two hundred grains. Regan's gun and belt are full of .40-44 Winchester cartridges—and the bullet in every one is a two-hundred-grain slug."

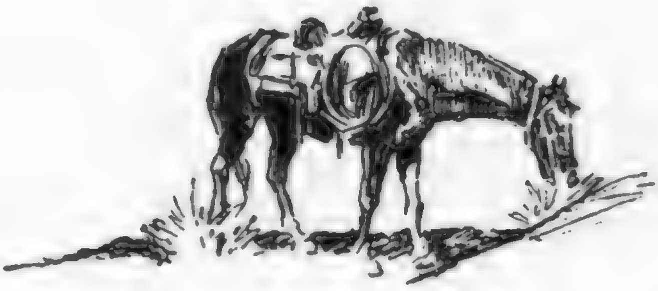
"Yes?" said Tip Smith.

The sheriff picked up the second pellet. "This one, Smith, is different. It weighs more. Just two hundred and forty-six grains, this one weighs. Every Smith & Wesson .44 shell is loaded with a two hundred and forty-six bullet. Now this was the only one of its kind; and it was taken from Hanley's back, after it had ploughed through his heart. Do you happen to remember, Smith," Callahan demanded, "that *every shell in your gun and belt is a Smith & Wesson .44?*"

Tip Smith caught his breath, like one who has been plunged into icy water. There was a pause, a moment of bated suspense; and then the lithe body of Tip Smith began to relax. He reached in his shirt pocket for the makings. His deft fingers scattered the flaky tobacco on the paper without spilling a grain. A swipe on his tongue and the cigaret was complete.

"You're pretty good, Sheriff Callahan," he said with a sardonic leer. "I hope to meet you in hell. Meantime, if you look in the bottom of the oat bags on the pack saddle you'll find a couple of thousand in gold that will help you send me there." He snapped a match on his thumb-nail and lighted the cigaret that hung from his lips.

Sheriff Callahan walked forward and drew from his pocket the handcuffs which had never lost a man. Without a word, and still smiling, Smith allowed them to be clamped on his wrists. The click of the locks as they snapped was a sound that would echo again with the springing of a trap at Raeburn. For Sheriff Callahan once again was bringing in his man with a confession.



Part Four of

Black Sheep's

A Romance of Earth's Darkest Places

Preceding events briefly retold

Philip Amory, war veteran and proprietor of a trading-post in Daru, Papua, returning from Cairns on a B. P. boat, rescued Jinny Treacher, a chorus girl, from sharks. This deed won him Jinny's heart and also the affection of Pia Laurier, a fellow passenger and the daughter of wealthy Australians.

Amory became madly in love with Pia, but realized he was in no social or financial position to press his suit. Furthermore he learned from the ship gossip that Pia is engaged to a Sir Richard Fanshawe. On leaving the ship at Thursday Island, Amóry meets Fanshawe who is coming on board.

The name Fanshawe means little to Amory, but the glimpse he got of him made him feel sure he had seen the man before. He could not get this thought out of his mind during the next few weeks at Daru.

On an evening, when two of the Assistant Resident Magistrates were in, Bassett, the Resident Magistrate invited Amory, called Black Sheep in Daru, "mostly because his eyes are black, and his hair, and partly because he is a decent sort of chap," to dinner. Besides the expected guests an Englishman named Spicer was present, a pompous ass and the forerunner of another so-called expedition going from Papua to the other side. Spicer explained he was to organize the party while awaiting his chief, Sir Richard Fanshawe. At the mention of Fanshawe's name from another's lips, Amory's memory gets a jolt—he remembers with horror when and where he saw Fanshawe before.

A night several years previous his boat was driven ashore on an island then unknown to him. He found it to be Iota, the leper colony. That night he saw Fanshawe make his escape from this island.

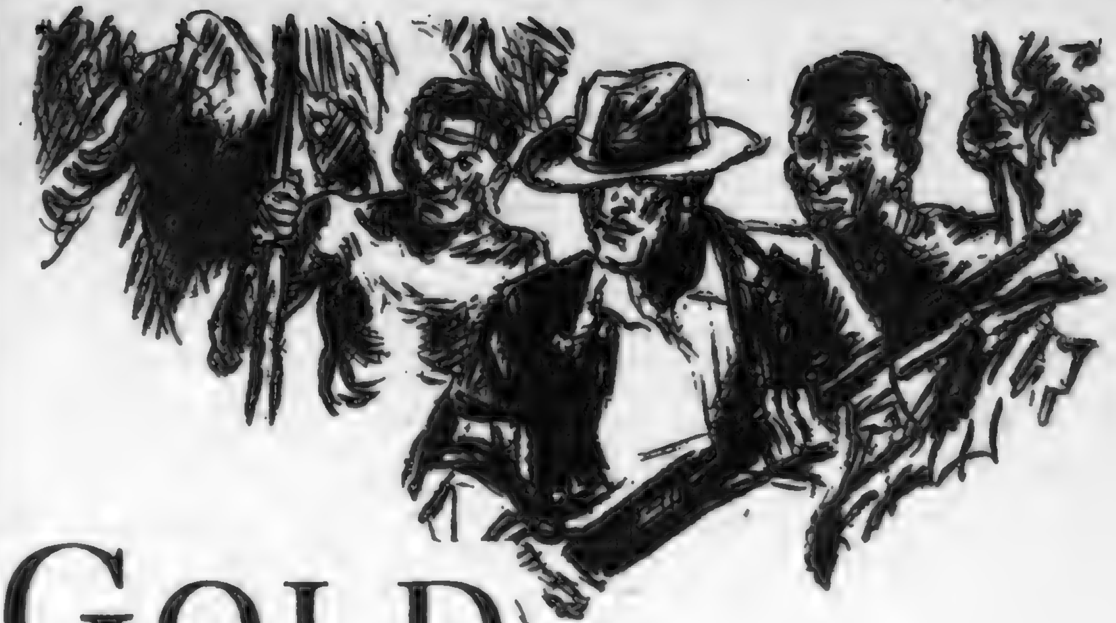
Thus Amory is nearly mad, knowing Pia Laurier intends to marry Fanshawe, the leper. He bolts from Bassett's house, but finally returns after the others have left, to acquaint Bassett with these strange facts. Bassett tells him his only course is to notify Pia's parents.

To do this Amory goes across to Thursday Island where he cables Pia's father to delay the marriage. While there he meets Jinny Treacher again who informs him that Fanshawe has arrived and knows his secret of the gold out back, and plans to beat him to it. At this news, Amory makes hurried preparations to start out back himself, to win the race for gold.

Amory arrived off Port Moresby on the evening of the third day. Knowing he could not get through the customs and quarantine that night he decided to camp on Fisherman's Island rather than sleep aboard the little cutter.

He awoke in one of the deserted shacks the next morning to find Sir Richard Fanshawe confronting him. Fanshawe informed him that he and Pia were to be married that day in Port Moresby and honeymoon on Fisherman's Island. Amory hurried to his boat, determined to make Port Moresby in time to stop the wedding. Fanshawe followed him in a speed boat, bearing down on him apparently determined on cutting his craft in two, thus putting an end forever to Amory's story of his escape from the leper colony.

Amory waited until Fanshawe's boat was almost upon him, then seized his rifle and shot him. Fanshawe dropped dead over the side of his boat into the shark-infested sea. Amory goes to Port Moresby. Fanshawe's abandoned boat is found later in the day and general gossip has it that he fell over-



GOLD

By BEATRICE GRIMSHAW

board, probably while trying to pull seaweed out of his propeller, and sharks got him. No suspicion is attached to Amory.

Amory finds Pia. She is not particularly grieved at Sir Richard's death, for as she admits, she was going to marry him chiefly out of pique at Amory's inattention. Amory tells Pia of the trip he is taking out back and what he expects to find there.

On the morning of the fifth day of his trip, Amory discoveres Jinny Treacher entering his camp in a half-starved, ragged and woebegone condition. She says she has followed him—wants to go on with him. This of course is impossible and as Jinny's porters have deserted, Amory dejectedly turns back to take Jinny out to civilization.

After several days on the back trail along the river they are met by Bassett in the government launch. He has started out to find Jinny as report has come to him of her foolhardy trip. Amory and Jinny both go aboard Bassett's launch for Amory has now used up his precious supplies and must reoutfit before again attempting to find the gold out back.

CHAPTER IX

SOMETHING LOST

EIGHT days passed, and another two to that, before I stood again upon the ridge that I had topped with so light a heart, on the morning that saw the unexpected arrival of Jinny. I was not light-hearted now; I was merely dogged; determined to go on at any and every cost; lose if I must, but at least lose fighting.

I had gone back, replaced my stores, endured with what patience I might—and that was little—the hundred and one delays that always block the path of the Papuan traveler, and got away almost by main force. First, however, I had seen Jinny safe aboard a local steamer that was going to Port Moresby. Why she wanted to go there, what she was going to do when she arrived, I could not conceive; and, in face of her hostile, obstinate silence, had little chance of finding out. I could only congratulate myself on the fact that Pia and she were unlikely to meet, since Pia's boat must now have sailed for Sydney; say as kindly a good-by to Jinny as she would allow, and privately hope—with a grudging, smarting kind of hope that was entirely illogical, but, I suppose, human—that she would console herself as speedily as might be.

Then, being free, I hurried to my former turning-back point, having coaxed Bassett to give me a lift right up to the landing-place, and once landed, driven the boys and myself for every ounce that was in us, up toward what I still hoped might be eventually called, the Pia Laurier Ranges.

There was need for haste. I was not in the least surprised, when I reached the beginning of my cut through the forest, to find that others had passed that way since. The camp-fires of Spicer and Caxon, the skeletons of their tent-poles, their empty tins thrown away, were marks plain enough for the veriest new chum to understand. For me, who was no new chum, there was much more; things more disturbing, because more significant of trouble, traces of natives, who were clearly spying and following. A broken bamboo pipe; spent arrows, barbed to the length of one's hand; a head-feather, swept away and caught on a high branch, where it stood up wickering in the wind with the extraordinary live motion that the Papuan alone can impart to his ornaments—these and other signs were plain to read, and caused me to ginger up my sentries as one does in the bush, with threats and lawyer cane, also to cut down my own sleep to the very last point compatible with keeping on the road in the day. I slept on a hair-trigger when I did sleep, and, toward dawn, sat waking; for the hour just verging on day is the hour of danger in the bush country of New Guinea. We had three weeks' stores, no more, since a native can not carry more than he can eat in about twenty-one days.

On this journey I dared not spare time for depot making, and would not spare it for the weary job of cutting and washing out sago, that is part of most exploring trips. I gambled on the chance of trade; I had some stores of beads, salt and knives with me, and meant to use them when fairly driven to do so. Trading with the cannibal tribes of the unexplored interior is playing with death, but starvation is death; so there's little choice between the two.

THE day that took me into what should have been unknown country was no day of joy. I knew that Spicer and Caxon had passed before me—guided by Jinny's tale-telling, which I had never doubted from the moment when I heard her weeping in the *Tauri's* cabin. The glory, the glamor, had gone from the scenery, magnificent though it was. Ridge on ridge, sharp as the run of towering tidal waves; huge, formless hills, faintly suggesting couching elephants, and hump-shouldered rhinoceroses; forests small and fine as mosses on a stone, clinging to the knees of incredible ranges that soared up and up and ever upward, ice-blue in the highest heavens—and all, beyond the line on which I stood, new, untrodden, unknown to any but the wild boars and the wandering cassowaries, and natives scarce less wild than they unknown . . . if it had not been for Caxon and Spicer.

I need not say that I looked for traces of the party ceaselessly, but so far I had seen no signs of them in the distance ahead. There was no spire of smoke, no sound of steel axes—unmistakable in country where the stone ax is the only foresting tool. Traces of the Tatatata tribes had vanished too. When I set out upon the new stage of the journey I was, to all appearances, as much alone with my boys as if no other human creature had been left alive upon the island continent of New Guinea.

It was here, as I had told Jinny, luckless Jinny, that the real work began. Down those appalling ridges, down half a day into a gorge as narrow as a railway cutting, then up again, climbing with feet and hands, hauling oneself by roots and stems of trees, seeing the river at the bottom of the gorge gleam silver from beneath the bend of your elbow as you climbed, ever climbed, then a moment's breather on a ridge that you could straddle like a horse, swept by winds cutting the very skin off your sweating face—down instantly again into the steam and the sliding and the mud and roots and leeches and scrub ticks and snakes, down to another gorge and another river. And so up and down again without pause, save when a rare chance of following the knife-edge top of some ridge occurred, and gave you a short, much needed relief—this was the day. Sometimes the river would prove too wide and deep to cross, roaring along in a succession of white-toothed rapids among black cruel rocks; then we would fell a tree as rapidly as possible and, one after another, cross it like rope dancers. As the day wore on, we gained elevation in spite of constantly losing it almost as fast as won; by late afternoon, the air was chill on the ridges, and the light had taken on that crystalline, blue-shadowed aspect that tells of increasing height. It was the hardest of work; sometimes we had to climb straight-up precipices, almost sheer walls of stone, by the help of the trailing vines that hung down them; sometimes we scrambled painfully along the tops of boulders in a river bed, sometimes—worst of all—we had to turn back, lose the height and the distance gained, and find, at infinite pains, another way across a ridge that had fairly beaten us. And all this had to be done, not at leisure but at the highest speed which I and the carriers could possibly keep up without leaving any of the party behind.

I had picked my boys; they were all mountaineers capable of scrambling up a one-in-two height with fifty pounds on their backs, till further orders; capable, as these mountain fellows are, of lowering the pride of a white man into the dust, with what they can do and what they will endure; yet, in sum, childlike, panicky, dependent utterly on the leader. If I didn't take them through, these brown, bloodthirsty, muscular babies of mine, if anything happened to me, they would never, any one of them, see home and wife and children again; that was sure.

If they were to fail me, run away from me, as carriers have done times without number, it was all Port Moresby to a mango that nobody on the coast would ever catch sight or sound of "Black Sheep" Amory, any more. We were dependent, utterly, on each other.

DURING these days of crossing the foot-hill ranges, and creeping by compass bearing, ever nearer to the home of the Tatatata, we became good friends with one another, my boys and I. Some of them could talk pidgin-English; I knew the dialects used by others, and at night, when camp had been made, and supper eaten, and the bone-wrenching fatigues of the day given way to the influence of rest and food, we used to hold strange conversations, close to the glowing heart of the campfires, now becoming grateful and pleasant at night. It seemed to me, in those evenings, that I slipped somehow, into another dimension of the mind; saw the world from an angle so new that I can not pretend to set it forth.

"What would Pia think of it all?" I asked myself, wonderingly. If she, the white-rose maiden, had been here. . . . I tried to picture it.

She would have loved the adventure. She would have thrilled responsive to the wonder of the scenery, to the untellable scents of the forest, scents that catch and stir the heart as no flower of civilized gardens ever has power to do. But—

"If you think the Laurier girl is goin' to live up rivers and in blacks' camps, you've got another think comin'."

Jinny's rough verdict, couched in the semi-American slang that Sydney's fast life uses nowadays, came back to me.

Of course I had known it. I had never seriously contemplated such an outrage on probability, as that I should place the daughter of the Lauriers in a New Guinea stick house with a head-hunter for cook, and go on with my recruiting and trading. Pia's money alone would have made such a thing laughable. She'd have built a Toorak villa on the banks of the Fly, and imported a French chef, had I asked her to share my life just as it was, without any ifs and perhapses. But while one side of my mind had known, assented to this, the other had persistently dreamed.

I don't know what I hoped for; I saw pictures, that was all. And the pictures showed, always, the primeval forest, the great sad rivers, that were my true home, with Pia—somehow—beside me.

It seemed that this trip, with all its solitude, its contact with the stone-age world, had been needed to show me that these fancies were flimsier than butterfly wings. I knew now—and little pleasure the knowledge gave me—that there was only one girl who would be content, at home, in the Papuan wilds, and that girl was not my rose-maiden, but Genevieve Treacher—"Gin-Sling."

Dreams, dreams! It was not dreams that lay before me now. If I meant to be fit next day, it was time for sleep.

I COULD, if I would, write the tale of every hour of that journey; relate in their order each blow of Nature and of Fate, and every counter that I made; tell of hunger and of thirst, of weariness macerating mind and body into one insensitive pulp. I could tell of revolts among the savages who accompanied me, of rough means used to subdue them.

Of the explorer's "black beast," fever, that threw me helpless on my bed of sticks, burned my flesh, and shook my bones returning, even after it had been conquered, to ride me through the bush for days, like some fierce panther clinging to the bowed shoulders of a staggering, still running prey.

Of a midday when I and my boys, resting, were leaped on from the forest behind, and surrounded, before you could have drawn two breaths, by tall brown devils whirling clubs and spears, and yelping the head-hunter's horrible dog-show yelp.

Of how we fought them, one to five, and I, firing low, shot one through the belly, and another through the chest, before they closed; almost ashamed I was, a trained soldier against these creatures with their savage weapons; and yet numbers are numbers, and they did not fear our strength, had to learn.

Of how they drew off and came again, charging in line, pluckier than you would believe, so that I'd have spared them if I could; but they brained my two best carriers, and the other carriers rushed in behind me, clubbing with rifle-butts where they could not fire; and so in five minutes it was over, and the tribe off into the bush again, with a head they'd taken from one of the corpses while the fighting was too hot for me to notice. . . . And my fellows, as savage as the others, finished that day's march with heads, four of them, slung on top of their loads, singing as they went. And the work they had round the fire at night with them, the primitive taxidermy, the painting and the feathering, I'd tell you, but you would not listen.

Yes, I could tell much, a volume. But I will pass over that journey, in retrospect, more easily than I passed in fact, and come to the crucial day, the morning when I made Tatatata.

I guessed I might be near; I had thought so for a day or two, but it was impossible to say exactly. Northanger, that fine geographer and explorer, could have told to an inch; Purchase or Bassett, used to uncharted travels, would have had a very good notion of where they were, and how much remained to be done. I could only guess, and use my head for country which had served me well enough so far. Somewhere within two days' march of the pit, I reckoned myself to be, and that was good enough; there was cheer in it, hope in it, something to set weary legs climbing more briskly, fill a tired, discouraged mind with bright pictures of what might come to-morrow.

WE WERE climbing a ridge, just like a hundred that we had climbed since the start; foremost carriers slowly hacking way for the rest through a mess of liana and trailing bamboo; leeches waving tails and dancing on the ends of branches, eager to sink their teeth in our flesh; other leeches hanging in gorged and clotted bunches from legs, arms, ears of the party; ants with hot-pincer jaws running free in our hair—all as it had been for days.

The ground was steep beneath our feet; no down slopes of late, no maddening gullies, into which one slid with slacked muscles and angry mind, knowing too well that double payment must be made for the relief. The air was thinning; nights had been colder; wild strawberries in the moss glowed here and there like fiery eyes of imps; now and then a daisy marked increasing altitude. Yet, I did not think that we were very near; did not guess (perhaps the bout of fever had marred my reckoning) that the lane of our long journey was reaching its turn at last.

In front of us, the sky began to show pale through thinning tree-tops. "I'll halt there," I said, "and fell a lookout," for you must cut down a score or so of trees when you want to see where you are in a Papuan forest. You make a clearing, and climb the tallest trunk. On the top of a ridge is the best place to fell.

"Come on," I said to the carriers. "Double ration tonight." I had been holding back a little; I could afford that spur.

They raised a shout, and I shouted with them, for encouragement. And so shouting, plunging upward and forward, like the men of Xenophon when they came upon the sea, we topped the ridge, found empty air before us, and saw—The Pit.

By Heaven, it was a wonderful sight. I was to see it often after, but never once did I come upon it without something of the first thrill that seized me when I broke out of the forest, and viewed, lying far below me, the enormous slopes and scarps of the nameless basin, in the finding of which two white lives, and many dark, had already been lost.

MORE calmly than I could have believed possible, I looked down the long fall-away of landscape below, over the miles of sinking ground, to where the basin, clearly defined, curved itself down into a center that looked, at this distance, no bigger than a bedroom. I knew it was more, however; I knew the whole thing was huge in scale. The countryside, forested, river-seamed, lit by flashes of green reed-grass, spired by minarets of barren, upstanding rock, was wider by far than it looked; and all of it fell away, league on league, into this basin; all centered itself, at last, in the little room-like space at the end and heart of it.

I looked at the rocks; marked the lie of the hills, the nature of the whole place, remembered all I had heard of mining lore, and struck my hand, violently, upon the nearest tree.

"Found," I shouted. "I'm made—I'm made forever!"

Then, across the visions of gold, gold and more gold, that blazed on my inner sight, came wonderfully slowly, as come lovely things, a picture that outshone all other glories. From the horizon the clouds of early afternoon were shredding away, blown by some distant wind that left untouched the still trees of the basin, never stirred the long grasses where I and the carriers stood at gaze. Slowly, steadily, the veils were withdrawn, making bare to my sight the far, high, ice-blue peaks of the Pia Laurier Range.

"I've seen it," I thought, and as if a sacrament had been celebrated, splendidly, before me. "It's hers," I thought; and in the same moment. "It's herself."

I have written the name of my lady wide across the maps of Papua; but it is true that Nature had written it there, before me. The sun was westering; it was impossible to descend into the pit that day. With pity I remembered how Grace and Jackson, starving, sick, at the end of their resources, had stood where I stood now, looking, like Moses, over a Promised Land on which they never were to set foot. If it was hard for me to wait until next morning only, what must it have been to them to see all this, know what it meant, and leave it behind? Yet they had done right. The descent was all of two thousand feet, the country rocky and difficult; Grace and Jackson and the wretched remnant of their boys, even if they had succeeded in getting down to that distant hole, would certainly never have found strength to climb up again. The route through the limestone country had been their destruction. No one, assuredly, would ever go that way again—now that I had shown another.

ON THIS, I remembered what, had entirely escaped my mind—the Spicer expedition. I had thought much of it in the last few days, and wondered where it was. Traces of a party ahead had vanished some time before; but that was no serious puzzle; a very little deviation from the route I followed might explain it. I had been sure, however, that I should see or hear something of them when I arrived at the pit. I hadn't really hoped to catch up the start given to Spicer by Jinny's impulsive treachery; without doubt, I had thought, they would be there before me.

It seemed they were not. In the late sun of afternoon, every pinnacle and boulder, each tree, each channeled stream course, of the whole immense basin stood out, some roughly drawn, near at hand, others, miles away, etched in with needle-point fineness but all as clear as a steel engraving seen through a piece of golden glass. And from end to end, there was no sign of life.

I could not understand this; it looked like trouble of some kind, I thought—but even so, what business of mine was any trouble of Spicer's? He and his friend had made their own bed; let them lie on it. For me, there was victory; discovery; and, if I knew the signs of gold—wealth too. Wealth such as no one in Papua had ever dreamed of, maybe; for no one in Papua had ever seen such a formation in gold-bearing country. I simply did not dare to think what it might mean. I have, since then, heard the explanation offered by geological science for the extraordinary place. If I were to write it, all but geologists would skip it; so I will let it go.

You may be sure there was no lying late abed for any one next morning. I had the boys up at four o'clock; their food was cooked and eaten, camp struck, and every one ready to start, before the first mysterious grays began to show above the basin's farther rim. Gray turned to geranium-color as we made our start downward; in the first hollows and 'chines, there was scarcely light enough to see one's way, but by and by the strong warm sun came up, and we bathed in flowing gold.

It was a rough road down; as far as I could judge, no foot of brown man or of white had ever conquered those glacis and moraines of rock, plunged through those intricate, thorny areas of bush, been trapped, as we were trapped, time and again, by impassible gorges slanting across the way, and compelling one to hark back and look for another path. Progress was incredibly slow; still we kept on at it, determined to reach the bottom of the pit before dark. No midday halt was even thought of; through the heat of the day, foodless, without rest, we plunged and struggled on. And we had our reward. It was not more than half-past four, by my watch, when we topped a ridge of strangely heaped, wild rocks that for a while had barred our view, and saw, so near that we could almost have taken a long leap into it—the pit.

IT OUGHT to have been a lake, but deep clefts in the surrounding walls showed why. It looked, on the whole, very like the dry bottom of a lake, a smallish one, spread over with gravel and broken by ridges of stone. I looked at this, and I looked at the water channels, bare now, in the dry season, that scored the sides of the enormous funnel; at the rocks among which I stood, at the type of rock that made the ranges above. Across my mind flashed one inevitable simile; but before I could give it speech, Ogo, a Mambaré carrier, worn, bowed and thin by work on many gold-fields, took the words out of my mouth.

"*Taubada*, all same *bokkis*," he said.

It was. It was a natural sluice-box, if ever there was one. (I am not at all sure that there ever was another.) The sharp sides, the gravelly "wash" at the bottom, the "riffles" of rock, the cave-openings through which water could pass away, without materially disturbing anything that had been swept down to the flat—swept, rainy season after rainy season, year after year, century after—

"Hold on," I thought. "You're losing your head; such things don't happen." But I found that I was shaken and trembling.

Ogo watched me with an expressionless, toffee-colored eye. Some unoccupied corner of my mind became aware that he knew what I was feeling; had seen it all often, long ago, in the red days of the Yodda and the Aikora; understood it and was bored with it. . . . The other carriers had dumped their loads, interested only in the fact that we had come early to our night's camping place, and that there was time for a laze and a smoke before the work of cutting tent-poles.

I did not notice them; I did not cast more than half a thought to Ogo. I left the pack of them there on the rim of the little flat, and plunged downward. We had done a hard day's work, but I took those rocks, those stretches of sloping sand and gravel, as a fairy-tale wearer of seven-league boots might have done; it was diving rather than descending. I took a toss at the very last, and came down with hands and feet outspread like a starfish, on a bed of gravel that cut my palms, and tore the knees of my trousers. I raised myself up; I wasn't hurt, scratched merely, but my hands and my knees were all over blood and gravel . . . and gold.

THE light was stealing up the sides of the huge basin; from the small flat at the bottom, dusk rose like a smoky vapor. High up it was still clear; a chain of hornbills, black against blue, trailed itself over the rim of the hills and fled. I could hear their distant, clanging cries; when they stopped, I could hear—so still was the valley—the muffled drum of my own heart, thumping, now, quite slowly, as I sat in the midst of my kingdom, of my dream made real. Why feel excited over it? the thing was done and won, the long fight over. Two handfuls of golden gravel had changed my world.

"I am Black Sheep no more," was the first thought I can remember. It was not entirely pleasurable. There are sweet pastures for black, wild sheep, and for them only. . . . This gold discovery—I did not doubt or minimize its value; I knew too much for that—meant no small fortune, no quiet, comfortable sufficiency; it meant perhaps millions, and what millions brought with them. Black Sheep no more. Wanderer no more. The wild places no more. How could a man of millions live in what Gin-Sling had caustically termed "a hole in the bush?"

On that, I went to supper, and to rest. First, however, I washed from my hands the dirt and blood and gold—that symbolical, inseparable three—examined the gold with care, as it seeped to the bottom of the enameled basin, and found its amount, and quality, surprising. "There's been nothing like it—there never will be again," I thought. "And it's that pinch of yellow, not anything I am or might be, that has made me worthy of the most splendid girl on earth. A mad world, my masters!"

The peaks of the Pia Laurier Range, far, fairy-blue in the mounting moon, looked down upon me as I slept.

CHAPTER X

IT WAS nearing ten o'clock, which is late in the morning for people who rise at five, and Ogo and I were at the end of a long job.

We had left the other carriers busy wooding and watering above, had gone down on to the flat, bringing with us pick, shovel, pegs, prospecting dish, and long steel measuring tape, worked about a bit among the "riffles" made by half-sunken rocks, and taken sand and gravel from promising spots. I had washed out a few dishes, and found them go something like three ounces of fine gold to a dish, with nuggets to spare, over and above; on an average, about fifteen pounds' worth to every dish we washed. It was a veritable jeweler's shop; you could kick the sand up with your toes and see it glitter. There were some acres on the little flat, though it looked from above as if you could have covered it with the cloth of a fairly big dinner-table; and every rod had thousands of pounds' worth of gold in it, washed down into the flat from all the peaks of all the hills that surrounded it—those quartzy peaks, with diorite here and there, that fairly shouted "Gold."

Not all the gold of the Pia Laurier range had come down to the bottom of the basin; some of it, no doubt, had sunk through the stream-beds that channeled the slopes (disappearing streams, most of them, of the kind known to the inner ranges of Papua); some might have been washed away, in the rainy season, across the flat itself into the caves that communicated with unknown depths below. But the rock riffles, and the hollowed shape of the basin, had taken care of most of the mountains' treasure; the place was, as Ogo had said, a natural sluice-box.

I had a right, as discoverer (for Grace and his partner had never actually found gold) to peg out for myself one area of a hundred feet by fifty, and a prospecting claim due to me as discoverer of a field forty miles from any other—of thirty further claims. This left little for anyone else who might come along. . . . "My troubles!" I said. "Let them want. They meant to let me." Some of the ground, judged by what we washed, was a little richer than the rest. I picked that, measured, pegged, nailed up my notice, and was done. The warden of the field, when appointed, would have to check and confirm the work; but for all practical purposes, I had my ground secure.

The sun was high now, and down in the airless bottom of the pit it had grown hot; so hot that the sweat ran in streams down my arms, and dripped salty from my forehead into my mouth.

"Smoke-oh," I said to the boy, contemplating with pleasure the neat white pegs that marked off my fortune. Ogo wiped a wet face with a wet arm, felt for his tobacco in the fiber bag that he carried, found his bamboo pipe, and lay down under the shade of a rock. He had made no comment at all on the gold, or the claim, or the whole colossal discovery, that was to change the face of a countryside, remodel some lives, lose others, leave nothing as it had been before. Ogo had seen it all, must have known what it meant; nevertheless it said nothing to him.

IT WAS a Stone-Age face that he turned to me, a face incredibly remote from me and my wild imaginings and pursuits, as he said, breaking the silence of a morning—"*Taubada*, I think maybe we get a big fig (pig) along that big pire." (Fire-timber forest.)

"We can get pigs in plenty," I told him, puffing at a welcome cigaret. "We'll shoot all you like. Going to stop here a week." For I was minded to load a carrier or two with gold; they were traveling light now, having eaten up a great part of their loads. Food problems did not trouble me; as Ogo said, the place was good for game, and I judged we were in one of the numerous uninhabited districts of the inner country, where no risk was entailed by shooting.

Ogo drew at his bamboo pipe; he was happy, at ease; resting from tedious and unnecessary work; moreover, the interest of the moment had shifted to sensible subjects. . . . I watched him, as I sat perched on a rock, my face toward the long hard way by which we had climbed down, the day before. Ogo was looking up the east side of the basin, toward the ranges.

A change came over his face. It came very quickly; it seemed, in an instant, to set his features stiff, like water frozen by an icy wind. He ceased to smoke; held, for a moment, one mouthful in his cheeks, then blew it out, as something not needed any more. His eyes narrowed to strips of hard glass.

"What do you see, Ogo?" I asked him, not turning my head.

"*Taubada*," he answered, sitting up on the sand. "Me see two white men, flenty New Guinea man he come."

I looked behind me now. Up the long slopes that ran to eastward. I could see nothing at first. Then I could see—some way down the sides of the basin, dark dots moving, white dots following them. They had just come up out of a gully that had hidden them from us for possibly an hour or two; they were going fast, making the best of their way toward the bottom, like sugar ants raiding a bowl, and very anxious to get to the sugar as quickly as possible. It was, beyond all doubt, Spicer, Caxon, and their carriers.

WHEN I saw them, I burst out laughing. The walls of the pit caught my voice, echoing it from side to side, and a flock of those queer, blue-eyed Papuan crows that laugh like Mephistopheles himself, picked up my merriment, and handed it on among themselves, so that by and by the pit, and the crows, and I, among us, were filling the air with crash after crash of sardonic laughter. But the crows had the best of it. They went on long after I was done. Something seemed to have pleased the brutes. I have never liked crows.

"*Taubada*," remarked Ogo, spitting a blood-red chew of betelnut out of his mouth. "Thass figeon he bad-fellow figeon; some man he die."

"You're an augur, aren't you?" I said, screwing up my eyes to watch the little, down-trickling ants of people.

"Yes," answered Ogo simply, answering the tone rather than the words, as savages do. He added, incidentally, rolling another chew. "Me savvy altogether along everything."

"Well," I muttered to myself, "if you aren't omniscient, at any rate you and the crows can make some fair-to-middling guesses."

For when I thought of Spicer and his patron; of all that the brute must have known, and of the silence—paid silence doubtless—that he had kept; of how he had balked me once, and had just fallen short of ruining me now—well, it was not astonishing that my fingers, half consciously, crept toward my left hip and the stock of the revolver without which no wise man travels through unknown Papua.

I have said that my mind, like my body, had come to maturity on the red fields of the War. There are thousands, near my age, who will understand just what that means. The War is dead, forgotten, as are its millions of dead and forgotten fighters; but the personalities shaped by it remain. It has never been possible for me to regard killing, inevitably, as murder. When Spicer and Caxon came fairly into sight a little later, when they were well within rifle shot, nothing restrained me from picking off the tall, fair man with the awkward tread, and ridding the earth of a brute as little fit to live as Fanshawe himself had been, save the knowledge that I should certainly hang for it, and that if I hanged, I could not marry Pia Laurier.

And if you doubt this frame of mind in a civilized man, spend weeks, yourself, up country among head-hunters and cannibals, with a crew of the same for carriers; forget, as one does forget with amazing swiftness, that anything exists anywhere else, besides black forests, tangled creepers, fierce rapids and torrents, wild boars, crocodiles, snakes, and men as savage as any of these—then tell me how you look upon your enemy, when you meet him again under circumstances such as those that heralded the arrival of the Caxon-Spicer expedition.

Seeing them come was as nerve-racking as the well-known embarrassment of meeting an acquaintance in a long empty street, each of you watching, advancing, each of you wondering when it will be time to commence the inevitable grin.

They did not hurry as I had done; they did not leap on to the gravelly flat that held more treasure than all the older goldfields of New Guinea put together. We met at leisure in the midst of the glacis of rocks that fringed the bottom of the pit. Caxon, a silent fellow always, nodded sidewise to me, and sat down on a rock, hands in pockets, surveying the flat with a sharp professional eye, which assuredly did not miss my pegs or my notice. Spicer came up grinning, held out his hand, and quoted fatuously, "Doctor Livingston, I presume?"

I THINK that in that moment, an ill-defined presentiment of misfortune seized me. I suppose I must have felt vaguely that this defeated Spicer had no reasonable right to look cheerful; certainly none to crack jokes. But if I did feel anything of the sort, it was submerged by my personal dislike of Spicer himself. I found myself hating his hands, once unpleasantly white, now red in blotches, and scarred by bush travel; and his face, with the blue, heavily lashed eyes, straight nose, Charley Chaplin mustache, and long hard chin—a queer mingling of masculine and girlish traits. I wanted to abuse him, strike him. What I did say was only— "Haven't left many of the plums for you, I'm afraid."

"Are there plums?" he said foolishly, as if he had come up into the heart of wild New Guinea for a walk. His eyes were roving while he spoke; I saw them rest on my pegs, and for a moment they opened wide, and showed as many ugly things as the windows of a convict jail. It was Caxon who spoke, however.

"What does it go to the dish?" he asked. He was sitting as he always did sit, characteristically, with legs flung wide apart, and arms akimbo, soft hat pulled right into his eyes, and insolent lip stuck out. Of the few old-time miners remaining in New Guinea, I had always liked Caxon the least. I thought him to be a man battered almost out of human likeness by the hardships of an incredibly hard life; a thing without bowels.

Nevertheless, I answered him. There was no use denying patent facts; and besides, I would sooner have broken the other nine commandments any day, than the false-witnessing one.

"About four to the dish," I said.

"Weights?" asked Caxon, tilting his chin a bit more. Caxon could talk with that chin, even when silent.

"Ounces," I answered him with equal brevity. Spicer let out a whinnying cackle of delight, but Caxon made no sign.

"I suppose," he said presently, "we had better have dinner." It was three o'clock; they had—as I afterward heard—camped part way down the crater on the previous night, and traveled since dawn. It was by a very short head that I had won.

I hadn't dined either, so we joined our messes—it would have been contrary to New Guinea bush custom to do anything else. Under my tent-fly, on my table of saplings, the food was spread; tin and tea and biscuit, as always, and we shared it, silent, as bush folk are silent at meals, looking now and then at one another, and thinking, I dare say, pretty hard.

Above us swept amethyst, blue and gray, the circle of the wide landscape that sank down to the tiny flat. And bronze-winged hawks and hornbills planed through the burning sky; and there was a smell of hot stones in the sun, and a clinking noise of bell-birds somewhere near, as if strange gnomes were at work with invisible hammers, mining the gold that no man in all the ages of New Guinea had ever seen, ever touched till I saw and touched it, and shed my blood upon it, that morning. And while we ate and drank, and watched each other slyly from under our eyelids, there was just one thought in the minds of everyone— "Gold!" But not very far from it, I think, was the thought of the other thing that maddens, too, when seen; that cries out, too, when flung upon the ground—blood.

THIS field was unlike anything else ever found in New Guinea, in that it had no room for free enterprise. All the other fields—the Yodda, the Aikora, the Keveri, the St. Aignan, the Lakekamu, the Waria, the Woodlark—were big, almost indefinite in extent. If a man could not stake his claim on one creek, he could go out and find another, maybe better. If a rich "jeweler's shop" was all taken up, there would probably be something as good to be found not far away. A prospector could take his boys and his tools and dynamite miles up into the neighboring bush, back his own opinion, and justify it, perhaps, with a take of some few hundred ounces, coarse or fine, all worth in the neighborhood of four pounds an ounce.

Here it was different. You might no doubt go prospecting among the hills with fair chance of an ordinary success; but no one was likely to relish that, with the washings of half a dozen fields all concentrated into one marvelous natural sluice-box, ready for the taking.

It was, in fine, a meal for only one; but a royal meal at that. And Spicer's expedition had missed it, by a day.

"Better be careful of 'accidents' in the bush," I thought, even as I pressed the two to share my food. "It's a big strain on any man's self-restraint. Nothing open, of course — I'd respect that — but so many little sneaky ways of killing are possible."

"What kept you back on the road?" I asked the two. I wanted to know; besides, this silence was irritating me. They looked so well pleased with themselves; had so little right to be pleased.

"Foolery," answered Caxon, his mouth choked by biscuit. "Spicer here won't realize that I'm leader, and—"

"Quite incorrect," bleated Spicer, in what I fancy he took to be an "Oxford accent." "At the death of Sir Richard, the leadership devolved on me. We had been disappointed—sadly disappointed—in one or two people who had intended to join us; put in capital and all that—it became impossible to do as we had intended, cross the country and open up the districts that you people have so sadly—"

"Cut it out," said Caxon. "We've done more than the like of you could do in a hundred years. This man," he continued, "has had to be led by the hand through every puddle on the way; he cried when it rained—"

"I did not, damn you," was Spicer's reply.

"Morally speaking," went on Caxon, "you did. You yelped the whole trip. Now go on."

"I decided," said Spicer, with a nasty glance at the other, "that the interests of the Empiah would best be served by opening up what we had been led to understand was a probable gold-field of the very—"

"You were out for cash to go on the spree, same as myself," commented Caxon. "And if you'd fired just about two more shots into that crowd of natives we met, neither of us would ever have seen this place."

"We are too late in any case," said Spicer, in what seemed to me, oddly enough, a somewhat reproving tone. "As regards the natives, we were in frightful peril—"

"Not till you loosed off at them, and dropped a girl and a young boy—"

"I aimed—"

"Maybe, but you never hit what you aim at. You started the whole crowd on us, and then I had to shoot, and we wiped them out considerably. Of course we had to go round after that."

"The result of your alleged leadership," patronized Spicer, "being, in sum, that we have arrived after all the valuable ground is pegged."

"Yes," said Caxon simply, and buried his face in his pint-size pannikin.

I knew the Papuan miner too well to question him. But there was something about the whole deal that I did not understand.

"It doesn't matter," I thought. "If they fancy they can out me somehow or other in the bush, they've got another think coming. I've got the place in spite of them all, and I'll keep it."

WE FINISHED our meal, and the two newcomers, without further parley, went down to the flat and began walking about. They had no very large area to walk in. Spicer, I saw, was for going over my claim but Caxon spoke to him roughly (it is an appalling breach of etiquette, on any gold-field, to visit a claim unasked) and he drew back. Then they began talking. They stood with their backs turned to me; Caxon never stirred his head, but Spicer, now and then, threw a glance at me over his shoulder, showing—what I had not much doubted—that I was the subject of conversation.

It was fairly late in the afternoon by now; nevertheless, the pair started off, when they had crossed the flat, on what was evidently a brief prospecting trip. I heard the clink of Caxon's pick now and then, and the sharp tap of a hammer. I did not trouble much about them; I was too busy making use of the opportunity to wash out a few more dishes of gravel. There could be no question, now, of loading carriers with gold for the homeward trip, but I wanted, at least, a good sample.

I do not think I shall ever forget that hour—the ecstasy of washing out dish after dish, lifted almost anywhere on the flat, and finding, sure as day, at the bottom of every one, a rich sediment of yellow dust and flakes. I had prospected before; found gold before—not to my profit. I remembered the hopeless weariness of washing through an entire morning, here a dish and there another, from various parts of the ground I had selected; finding perhaps "colors" (which means a couple of minute spangles) in one dish out of twenty; calculating that, after working hard half the day, I had got about half a crown's worth. No use dynamiting, tearing up, fluming water, placing sluice-boxes, for that.

Here also there was no use in tearing up and dynamiting; no need either.

Nature, amazingly, had done the work. My claim might be the better for sluicing later on; but at the moment, one could collect enough to make any man crazy drunk with gold-lust, out of the simple washing of a dozen dishes.

I washed them; collected the gold (it was about thirty-five ounces) and put it away in one of my swags, for Caxon and Spicer were now returning from what I took to be a fruitless quest, and I did not want them to see my marvelous gains. True, they knew what Tatatata was running to the dish, and that I was panning some out, but there's all the difference in the world between knowing gold is somewhere about, and actually seeing the shine of it.

THEY came straight up to me, evidently a preconceived plan. They looked tired and dirty, discouraged too. Caxon's chin was not so far outthrust as usual; Spicer's mouth dragged open, and there was a nasty look about his pretty blue eyes that I had seen more than once before.

"Well, Baa-Baa," he began unpropitiously, "it seems that the only thing we can do—"

"Say that again," I interrupted, "and say it right."

"Mister Amory," he corrected, with scornful emphasis. "The only thing we can do is to peg out what's left, and go back."

"You understand the mining laws of the country, I suppose," was my answer.

"I do, if he doesn't," put in Caxon. "We're not going to visit the Mines Department this trip. The best thing you can do is to come back with us. You've got the loan of us over the whole business, and we'll all be safer together. That fancy shooting of Spicer's has made the bush a bit lively, I reckon."

I reflected. Caxon was undoubtedly in the right. Joining forces and carriers would be best for everyone. My boys had already shot a couple of big tusker pigs, which would help out the food question. We could travel faster together, because there would be plenty of hands to cut a road when wanted; more safely, because the natives would be slow to attack a big body of people. There was nothing that I need stay for, now that I had pegged my claim; I had only to go down to Port Moresby and get it granted.

NEVERTHELESS, I was loth to go. The blue and amethyst slopes of the great basin—so marvelous, so still, so far away from all the outer world—called me; the veiled, peering crests of the Pia Laurier Range clutched at my heart. This place was mine, in a sense beyond that of mere claim-ownership. If I had not first seen it, I had first set foot on it, discovered its treasures; it belonged to me as the maiden belongs to her first master, no matter who, beforehand, may have looked on her with desire. Pioneers, and they only, will understand, when I say that I had a passion for Tatatata; that it came monstrously hard on me to leave it.

Still, I had to go. The liberal mining laws of Papua would support my claim, if taken up at once; if, on the contrary, I allowed other claimants to get ahead of me in making application, my title might suffer. Caxon, of course, knew this, made the best of a bad job, when he invited me to travel with the party. That was how I phrased it to myself.

Yet, and yet, when the next day came, when the tents had been struck, and the carriers' loads portioned out, and the long, hard, upward tramp was beginning, I could not do away with a sense of ill-defined anxiety. On the surface everything was right. I had won the race, taken the treasure. Caxon with his callous greed, disregarding everything in life but gain; Spicer, greedy too, foolishly tricked out in Imperial thoughts of greater souls that

> *"Hung loose upon him, as a giant's robe*
> *upon a dwarfish thief—"*

were both defeated. That was well. What, then, troubled me?

As far as I could define the matter, it was this: *they did not really mind.*

Inexplicable, that. Unsatisfactory, that. Disturbing—to the pioneer instinct that senses hidden danger;; feels, in the very rhythm of its pulses, coming storm, while skies are still blue, clouds still light and innocent, above.

THE thought (it was not a fear, nothing so definite) stayed with me through the greater part of the trip down to the Romilly River. Nothing occurred to deepen it; nothing, on the other hand, happened to make it less.

I could not help observing that my two white companions were almost nervously anxious lest I should leave their sight. If I so much as strayed away into the bush during our noonday rest, after some rare, ice-pale orchid plant that I coveted for Pia, the bear-like shuffle of Spicer would instantly disturb my solitude. If I was five minutes late for the evening meal miscalled dinner, one of Caxon's carriers, brown, bare, scarce visible in the six o'clock twilight, would begin to haunt my tent-door like a ghost, and keep on haunting it till I came out.

There is a streak of vanity in every man; my streak led me to conclude that the two of them valued my company—in view of the dangerous country we were traversing—more than I had supposed. Yet the puzzlement, the anxiety, were still alive, somewhere submerged in my mind. I did not altogether understand.

We had now passed the safer part of the journey, the uninhabited country that lay beneath Pia Laurier Range, and were entering a district owned by the nomad tribes who had already killed Grace's partner, and several of my carriers. It was like the rest of the country, a welter of razorbacks, gorges, torrents and sheer precipice. Villages there undoubtedly were, but they were cleverly concealed for the most part; once in a while, you would see a group of brown mushrooms clinging incredibly to the scarp of some huge cliff, and realize, with wonder, that they were not fungi, but houses; houses inhabited by human creatures unpossessed of wings, who had to reach them and leave them somehow, daily. There was never anyone visible about these places, even when you scanned them with a field-glass. I fancy that the inhabitants saw us long before we saw them, and went, some into hiding, others into ambush, without delay.

ON ONE afternoon, we had been climbing for some hours, having taken a route slightly different from that of the outward trip, and intending to cut across a ridge that both parties had previously circled from below. There were reasons with which I will not trouble anyone. This way brought us into a bit of new country; and so it was that, emerging suddenly on the top of the ridge, we came without any warning right upon one of the villages of the Tatatata tribe.

We had avoided villages up to this; the prudent explorer keeps away from Stone-Age Papuans, if he has no urgent business with them, since contact with unknown natives spells trouble, in almost every case. But here we were taken by surprise; quite unexpectedly we came straight into a clearing on the top of the ridge, with a bunch of shabby huts in it, overlooking a magnificent view of forests and ranges.

The people had heard us long before; their women, pigs, babies, and collections of skulls, were no doubt already carried off into the bush. We found the men awaiting us, plucky chaps that they were—thirty or forty naked creatures decked in feathers and shells and dogs' teeth, armed with the formidable bow of the rangers, that can shoot through at a hundred yards, and the stone club that smashes a skull as easily as a spoon smashes an egg. Not much to stand against our rifles—but they didn't know rifles; that was the trouble; and Caxon and myself were equally disinclined to stage a massacre, by way of teaching them.

Not so the wretched Spicer. With his book, no doubt, well to the fore in what he called his mind, and some stage idea of himself as a mighty hero urging him on, he seized his rifle, and, before either of us could stop him, had pumped half a dozen bullets into the crowd.

THE star-shell of profanity that Caxon touched off, upon this, would have done credit to Flanders—where, by the way, he had probably learned it. If Spicer couldn't hold himself, with firearms, Caxon could and did. But the time had passed for that. One man had fallen—I remember thinking, in the middle of all the mess, that Spicer was the rottenest shot I had ever seen—and the rest, hoo-hooing as head-hunters do, were right on the top of us.

You could not blame them. They were defending their homes and their women from incredible white monsters, who had made the first attack; if we had avoided the village, there would have been no trouble, so I remember thinking at the time. But there was not much chance for thought; we had all we could do, in the next few minutes, to keep our skulls from being smashed by stone clubs, and our bodies spitted by the effective broad-blade arrow used for in-fighting. Travel in Papua teaches you a respect for arrows; you begin to understand things about Crecy and Agincourt that may have puzzled you before.

There can be only one end to such a fight. Spicer's carriers fairly ran amuck; mine followed them, and though Caxon and I tried our best to hold the brutes (as well as we could, while defending ourselves) they made a shambles of the village square in about six minutes. Almost all that were left of the tribe bolted into the bush, and the carriers pursued, hoo-hooing in triumph. There is nobody braver than your Papuan when upheld by superiority of arms.

I have said that almost all left. One remained; a huge, powerful fellow, with fiery sunken eyes like a gorilla's, and arms that could have hugged a bear. He had singled out Spicer from the beginning, but a mass of blood-drunk carriers, clubbing and shooting, got between them, and the chief (such I think he was) could not break through. With half an eye and a fragment of my mind, I had somehow, in the midst of my own troubles, noticed Spicer; he seemed to have exhausted his magazine, without attempting to reload, and was trying furiously to back away, covered by the carriers.

I didn't notice him again until the carriers had charged out of the village. Then something happened, and happened so quickly that I hadn't time to realize it before it was done.

The big chief, who had been biding his time, made a leap half across the village square, caught Spicer in his gorilla-like arms, and sprang with him right over the precipice. Caxon, still spouting the eloquence of Flanders and Sari-Bair, followed as fast as he could, but wasn't fast enough. He stood hanging over the edge, alternately cursing Spicer and the chief. I gathered from a few red-hot sentences, that the black gorilla was one of the party into which Spicer had foolishly fired, some days earlier; that the whole trouble which beset us was due to his earlier folly. This explained what had been puzzling me—the reason for the ambush that the tribe had sprung on us; it would have been more natural for them to clear out when they saw us coming. I hadn't time to think about that, however, nor time to think about anything, save one fact which blazoned itself on my mind—that a white man, captured alive by a New Guinea tribe, is very much worse than dead. And as the chief had done, I jumped clear over the precipice.

I HEARD Caxon shout; no doubt he thought I had suddenly gone mad. Perhaps there was a little madness in the act, because I could not be quite sure that I should light where I reckoned the chief had lighted—on some safe, unseen ledge. And indeed, I was very near toppling down the rocky face of the mountain after all. I saw the ledge as I leaped, managed to hit it, and then, having boot-soles instead of bare prehensile feet to hold on with, I lost footing, I bumped down on my back, and saw, for one unpleasant moment, a whole blue countryside spread out between my sprawling legs.

It was touch and go, but I did not go that time. I got one elbow round a stone, clasped a projecting root with the other hand, and managed to wriggle back to safety. The chief had disappeared. I made after him, round the corner of the cliff. I did not look down; the path was not as wide as a book-cover, and that blue, spreading country below, with its long river courses of silver, was much too clearly visible, whether you looked for it or not. I came on the chief in a few moments. He had turned the corner of the cliff as neatly as a man takes a loaded lorry round a bend; he was carrying Spicer, with due regard to the law of centrifugal force, well on the outside, so that the luckless fellow's legs hung out over nothing at all. Spicer wasn't insensible, I judged, but he was limp and powerless with sheer fright.

There was no way of getting him unless one risked his life first; so, remembering what was likely to happen to him if the chief got away with him, I toppled that worthy over with a shot right into the back from my .45 Colt, and "stood by" to grab.

It was a near thing; so near that I used to wake up in the night and remember it, afterward. The chief went down with a yell that was like the long screech of a train going into a tunnel. I never heard him crash. I had seized Spicer's legs almost as I fired, but he went over the cliff too, and if

I had not dropped into a sitting position and, luckily, jammed one foot against a stone, I should have gone after. As it was, I had to hold up his entire weight until Caxon (who had been scrambling and cursing all this time, trying to get down the cliff face) managed to reach us, and take hold. I was pretty nearly done then.

Between us we got him up, and bullied and shoved him, somehow, on to level ground. He was as limp as two yards of tripe (Caxon's happy phrase) and barely able to speak. We gave him whisky, and started collecting the carriers. We were off the line of the village by now; nothing more was seen of the tribe who had ambushed us. Two carriers had been clubbed, and a third damaged. We had to carry him, hoping he might recover.

Again Tatatata had drawn blood.

ON THE road once more, I forgot the whole business. It seemed that Caxon did not, however. When we were camped that night, he got me away from Spicer (who seemed to like me rather less than he had before, on account of that morning's business) and spoke as I had not expected to hear him speak. I have said that Caxon was hard. So he was, hard as one of his own pick-heads, and unscrupulous as a village dog. But he seemed to think, absurdly, that my hurried dive of the morning and my rescue of Spicer, were something to be praised; he seemed to want—inexplicably—to make up for it, reward it. He was hampered, to no small degree, by the taciturn habit of his mind; nevertheless, he got out a sort of speech. "That was bonzer, what you did," he said; looked for a word, and failing to find it, repeated. "Bonzer. I couldn't have." Then he fell silent, and his hands dangled, loose at his sides; he looked at them as if they didn't belong to him, before he went on. "I tell you. Clear out. You clear out."

"What?"

"I can't go back on my mates. But—clear out."

I looked at him, puzzled. Was he trying to win the race into Port Moresby, get first with an application to the "Mines"? Was it a trick? Caxon was notoriously tricky. Or—what was it?

He saw my doubt, seemed to lose his temper about it. "I've warned you," he snapped. "I'll say one more thing, because—it was bonzer. Take another road. Get to Daru. Get across to The Island. Clear. There are countries— You're not believing me. Well, go your own way. Go to hell." He added a few embroideries, and stalked off. He seemed to be annoyed with himself.

I gave the matter little thought. If I had considered it, had acted otherwise than I did, the course of two lives certainly, three or four possibly, would have been changed. But what is to be, will be. I went on.

I don't know how many days we took on the downward journey. We were quicker, of course, than we had been going up; but it seemed a very long time to me. I wanted to reach the river. I wanted to find a boat, get down the coast to Port Moresby, feel the stones of the Lands and Mines Office hill under my feet, see, at last, my left hand holding down the neat black and white print of an application form, while I filled in, with the right, the words that would make me master of more gold, more fortune, than any man in New Guinea had ever dreamed of. I dreamed of it, now, daylong and nightlong; of the far, blue basin of Tatatata, of the wonderful sands silted into its bottom, of the gold they held, and all that the gold would buy.

So we came back to the Romilly River, we crashed through the last of the Liomas; we left the heat and heavy smell of the bush, and came into the fresh scents of flowing water, and the sweep of the river wind. Before us showed the green, marshy bank, and on the bank, a little group of tents, white, ridged, with separate flies—Government tents.

There were white people near the tents; I did not look at them, or even wonder who they were, for, unbelievably, I saw a woman's figure detach itself from the group, and move toward me; I heard it speak my name—and it was Pia.

CHAPTER XI

I SUPPOSE that the appearance of Pia, there on the Romilly River far from civilization, when I had thought her safe with her parents by this time, might have well astonished me, started me guessing and wondering. It did not—at first. Nothing on earth seemed so natural and right as that she should be there; should be anywhere where I was. She was my mate, she only, out of all the women in the world, all whom I had known, all whom I had not known. This was as plain to me as the swing of the sun from east to west. The rest of it followed.

She was wearing an exceedingly pretty white frock, and a wide white hat, that made her eyes look bluer than ever. Everything she wore was white. I noticed that, and was rather surprised that she did not wear some kind of sporting dress, here in the wilds; but all she did, in my eyes, was necessarily appropriate and right. Some way apart from the others she stood, on a clear space of marshy grass; it came to me that she had something private to say. Then I caught her hands, and held them for an endless minute, and I was sure that the trouble did not matter, whatever it was, because it had left her alive, and myself alive, and both of us together.

"Phil," she said with curt directness, as if seconds, minutes, were counted. "Will you do something for me?"

"Do you think you need ask?"

"Maybe. . . . I want you to make a blindfold promise, and you won't like that. I want you to promise you'll ask no questions."

I did not like it. Still, I answered—"I'll promise anything you choose, and ask nothing."

"Then, Phil, I want you to marry me—now."

The promise held—as a heel-rope holds a horse, that would break away, if only it dared. A hundred questions were in my eyes, I have no doubt; I have no doubt either that the whole hundred were drowned, swept out of sight, in the tide of fierce triumph that caught me when I realized that Pia was to be mine, today.

She read me. "There's a missionary with us," she said. "Mr. Gartney. He's coming now. He'll marry us, but—I can't—go with you."

"Go with me? I've come back!" I had her hand; I held it as if never, in life or death, I meant to let it go again.

"Yes," she said, her eyes looking at me and through me, in the same moment, as though she saw something very far beyond. "Yes, but it's good-by, all the same. You promised, Phil!"

"I'll ask nothing," I told her. But I kept that slim brown hand in mine, and I never let it go until the Reverend Mr. Gartney, and his two witnesses—the launch engineer and a stray trader who was traveling with them—had done with her, and with me; until my seal ring was on her marriage finger, and my name, the Black Sheep's name, was hers till death should part us. Then I let go, to place my arms about her, and before any and every creature who might be looking on, to kiss my wife.

She did not kiss me back; almost she seemed to shiver a little, as if with cold. I loosed her, looked round, and saw that my friend Bassett was there. I had noticed him on the river bank, some minutes earlier, but he hadn't seemed to matter.

WITH his tall rifle-armed police boys, he was walking toward us across the marshy grass; had reached us; was looking at me; was speaking.

"Amory," he said. "I'm sorry to say I have orders to arrest you for the alleged murder of Sir Richard Fanshawe."

I turned not to him, but to Pia. In one moment, I understood all. She, the fearless rider, the candid lover, had dared one more risk. She had tricked me into doing that which never, knowingly, could I have done—link my life with hers, beneath the shadow of crime and death. The words were said; there was no unsaying them. Pia was married to an arrested murderer.

"Anything you say," warned Bassett, "may be used in evidence against you."

I paid no more attention to him than to the winds of the Romilly River. I faced my five-minutes' wife, squarely looking her in the eyes. "You should not have done it," I said.

Pia looked back at me, and her eyes did not fall before mine, in that duel. "It's my answer to you," she said. "I know about everything."

"That you don't—"I was beginning, but Bassett cut me short.

"She does," he said. "I told her."

"You told—"

"Yes."

"What damned reason had you to—"

Said Bassett in his precise manner—"You don't seem to realize that you have no private affairs left. In any case, all this is very irregular. I must ask you to come with me. I'm sure you won't make trouble."

"I won't," I answered him. "Give me five minutes' talk first."

HE WENT away, remaining in sight. I turned to Pia. "What is it that you know?" I asked her. I could not believe the whole wretched story was out at last, or that she would dare to tell it if it were.

But the white fire of my wife's spirit dared anything. "I know," she said calmly, "that Richard was a leper—"

"Not proved."

"Suspected, at all events. I know you met him and told him you'd recognized him. And he said he did not care. And he was going to the mainland for the wedding. And you shot him, because you could not stop him any other way. You did it to save me. You knew you might be hanged for it—"

"Dear love, it's not might; it's will be."

"I don't believe it. But if you are, I'll go with you to prison, and I'll walk with you to the end, and I'll kiss you before you die—like this."

I met her lips before they had time to reach mine; and we clung together caring nothing for the men on the river bank, caring nothing for who saw us, in an embrace fierce, long as if indeed the shadow of the gallows tree rose up above us, ready to end all.

She drew back; the little feet that I had swept up away from earth, in the long passion of my kiss, came down again with their white wedding shoes splashing in the mud. "They'll take you in the Government launch," she said. "The *Papuan Chief* is down the river a little way, waiting for me."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Port Moresby. I never went away—so many things began to happen. Mr. Spicer turned up—he went to Fisherman's Island and questioned the old Soloman man who's care-taker—"

"Why, I never saw a soul about, except Fanshawe."

"No. But it seems he was hidden away somewhere, afraid to show. Mr. Spicer got it out of him. He—Mr. Spicer—knew all sorts of things—I can't think—"

"I can," I said, remembering that night on Daru, and the meeting with Spicer, outside Bassett's house.

"He set all this going, before he and the other man started up country after you. He must have known they'd be waiting for you here."

ALL that had puzzled me, all I had felt and feared, was plain to me now—too late. Well might they take their defeat lightly, when it meant so little! Well might they stick close on the way down to the trap that was to be sprung upon me—me, their only rival to the gold of Tatatata!

"I'm going," she said. "It has to be good-by, as I said, but I shall be near you, all the time, and if—if—"

She could not bring forth the black words a second time. "I understand," I told her, "God's blessing on you, darling." And upon that, we parted.

Bassett was waiting. Bassett took me to the launch. It appeared that Spicer and Caxon were going by the other boat. Bassett wouldn't take them in the launch. "We shall get there first," he told me. "It may matter to you, and may not. Anyhow you shall have the chance. I suppose you got something."

I leaned to pick up my swag; opened it, and turned out a pile of coarse gold, from the bottom of a billycan. "I washed twelve dishes for that," I told him. Bassett's eyes opened wide. "What have you struck?" he asked. "Looks as if you'd been raiding a jeweler's."

"I have," I told him. "A jeweler's shop"—using the local name for some unusually rich area or pocket. "But it isn't likely to matter particularly; if they break my neck at Koki gaol, I shan't have much time to enjoy it."

Bassett had nothing to say. I think he hated his job so much that he couldn't even be civil. I understood his frame of mind, more or less shared it, and on the run to Port Moresby, happily a brief one, we scarcely exchanged ten sentences.

On the day when we made port, the *Papuan Chief*, lagging a few miles behind us, I was given permission to visit the Mines Office more or less in custody, and make my application. So far as precaution could do it, I was holding Tatatata. But that my tenure was perilous, none knew better than I.

Caxon and Spicer were in court during the trial, when it came on a day or two after. They watched every point with the sharpness of prosecuting attorneys. I don't know what they made of it. What I made of it, that first day, was that I was not, at all events, going to be hanged. I had a lawyer; he was doing his best, and making the most of Fanshawe's attack on me; and his attempt to run me down. I knew, of course, that that had nothing to do with the case; but I thought of Pia, waiting for news in the little house among the oleander and bauhinia trees, and held my tongue. The old Solomon islander was chief witness. The boy I had hired in port, who cleaned my rifle and found one shot had been fired; a stray Hula native, who had been out fishing on the reef, and had seen me come away from Fisherman, make a long sweep, and return, were others. Spicer, when called, told shamelessly all that he had overheard under the house in Daru, and thereby sheeted home to me the one thing wanting—motive. I was known of course to be in love with Miss Laurier, but that alone would hardly have fixed the crime—if crime one must call it; I have never felt inclined to do so.

The end of it was that the jury found me guilty of manslaughter, and that I was sentenced to five years.

I AM quite certain that those twelve good men and true of Port Moresby stretched a point in order to save my neck; and I am equally sure that the judge and the Crown Prosecutor—one of whom was officially doing his best to have me hanged, while the other was officially ready to pronounce the sentence—were much better pleased with the verdict than they would have admitted officially.

I don't know that the people of Port Moresby, take them by and large, are any better or any worse than most small tropical communities; but I do know that in spite of their faults, which are pretty much mine, and in spite of their virtues, which are occasionally deadly, and are not mine at all I love them, and always did. They are solid at heart.

They stuck by me, that day. I killed Richard Fanshawe, if ever a man killed another. But they said—the store people, and the government people, and the planter people, who made up the twelve—that I hadn't meant to do it. So I was sent to Koki gaol, and there was no gallows built up inside the yard for me, after all. And I chose—out of a dozen who offered—a friend to go to Tatatata, and do the work that was necessary to hold my claim for me.

I had passed some days in the gaol already, waiting for trial. Pia had been allowed to come in and see me, together with the solicitor who defended the case. But now—now that my freedom was definitely forfeited, that the paying of the long price I had incurred was fairly begun—visits ceased. During the next three months, I might see no one, save the white gaoler and the black warders, and the prisoners, natives all of them. Except myself there were no white prisoners at the time; for that mercy, at least, I was thankful.

IT WAS late in the year now; the dry winds were over, and the wet winds begun. The avenue of palms that leads to Koki gaol shone emerald, silver-laced, against a plum-blue plain of sea; the poinciana trees were feathered in gay green, with blossoms like whole beds of scarlet geranium. From that yard, every pebble of which I was soon to know by heart, one looked down over league on league of sea, studded with islets beautiful though barren; up to the crests of near green hills, that turned, far off, to amethyst and delphinium blue. A lovely place; a place swept by fresh sea winds, and scented with jasmine and frangipanni flowers, a place where, at nights, in my small white wooden cell, with its open veranda, I could lie and look through the birdcage wires that shut me in, over plains of moonlight and of wandering, silver water—I, the wanderer, the wild bird, who must fly no more. A lovely place—a hateful place, a painted, smiling hell.

They did not consciously make it hell for me there. They were kindly cold, coldly kind, as gaol officials justly are. Holly the head gaoler, with his stiff upright carriage, his immaculate white helmet and starched white suit and white boots, always freshly pipeclayed; Holly, with his sharp blue eyes, and the smile that wasn't a smile, and the voice that could rake the hide off a delinquent native prisoner—turn him, with two words, into a heap of shivering brown jelly.

Holly wasn't my friend; he kept me to the letter of the gaol regulations; slacked nothing that might have been slacked, allowed nothing that could be refused. I suppose he was justified. He said in my hearing that I was a bad prisoner; gave more trouble than any three whites he had ever had before. I could learn working to order; I didn't mind piling stones by myself on the new little jetty, far removed from the black criminals who were doing similar work; I made no trouble about keeping my cell tidy, didn't grumble at the plain, sufficient food. What I could not learn was to avoid "answering back"; letting my sore and angry spirit flash out in sudden fury at the least reproof. What I did not realize, for long, was that in losing my freedom, I had also lost my rights as a human being and a man. It is so, in gaols; it must be so. There were times when I could have murdered Holly, smashed his black warders into butcher-meat. Yet there was no time—I think—when right, according to prison custom was on my side.

This had a bad result. When the three months were out, and visitors, by law, could be permitted, I got my one hour on Sunday, once a month, and not another minute. I got my letters, monthly; always read and initialled. The letters I wrote were read and initialled also. If I could have fitted myself into the prison shape so far as to behave "decently" "civilly" "remember I was in gaol, and not in the Hotel Australia," (Heaven knows I was admonished often enough) I might have "wangled" many a little indulgence, such as are granted to the model—usually experienced gaol-bird.

BUT for Pia and for me, there were no extra visits. Whole blank spaces of silence descended on the gaol and its inmates, for many weeks at a time; clocks relentlessly ticked off our precious moments, when they came. Worst of all, though perfectly legal and right, was the presence of Holly at all our interviews. He read a paper, and pretended kindly enough not to be listening; but—I ask you—what is love-making, under such conditions?

Seeing the fragile look of the gaol, the corrugated iron walls, climbable by any active man, the absurd chicken-wire that closed in my cell veranda, I had, at first, cherished fancies wherein the ancient tale of Pyramus and Thisbe jazzed with the seventeenth-century romance of imprisoned Arabella Stuart; where chinks in walls, with lovers whispering through, midnight assignations, gaolers outwitted, high dignitaries set at naught, and love triumphant over all, rang carillons through my excited brain. To be married to the sweetest most noble and gallant little lady in the world, and to spend one's honeymoon alone in a chicken-wired cage, with the little lady pining away in Tim Ryan's hotel, two whole miles away, impossible, unbearable.

Nevertheless, like most unbearable things it happened. Head Gaoler Holly had no notion at all of allowing prisoners, especially refractory prisoners, to whisper sweet nothings through chinks at any hour of the twenty-four, even if there had been chinks in the well supervised walls of the prison yard. Head Gaoler Holly, as instructed by the Papuan Government, paid surprise visits to the cells at night, especially mine—for which I could cheerfully have wrung his neck. If I had secreted the tin-opener, and broken out of prison with it—not a difficult thing to do at any time—Head Gaoler Holly would have had the telephone going, and the native police and the white constable out in full cry, and Black Sheep Amory caught in the law's sharp crook, and hauled back to the fold at Kokí, before he had had time to realize he was away. I went into Koki Gaol determined to break out—not in the hope of complete escape, which I knew to be impossible, in a country like Papua—but in the full intention of taking, at any cost, a day, an hour, alone with Pia, and paying for it afterward as circumstances might demand. From first to last, Head Gaoler Holly saw I got no chance.

Mrs. Head Gaoler, who lived near enough to the prison for me to see her moving about on her veranda, and for her to see Pia walking alone through the palms and poincianas to visit me, going away alone after—Mrs. Head Gaoler, being a gentle little woman, used to cry over the fate that thus parted two true lovers, and once even prevailed upon her stern partner to convey me a layer cake, stuffed at all points with cream and jam and sympathy. Which I relate, because Head Gaoler Holly, I know, repented this one weakness, and would much rather the world knew nothing about it.

But Mrs. Head Gaoler—well, I think her layer cake (I could not eat it, good as it was) may fairly rank with the "cup of cold water" which we are told will not be forgotten.

In the conclusion next month Pia leads an expedition out back.

An Authentic Story of the Pueblo Indians

When An Injun Runs

By ALBERT WILLIAM STONE

"PROFESSOR" JOB MEDILL, two hundred and forty-five pounds in weight, hailed Pat Hartigan from his comfortable seat just outside the door of his squat 'dobe dwelling. The "professor" was fanning himself vigorously with a palm leaf fan. Although it was early October, the dry heat of midsummer lingered in Taos.

"Made up your mind to take my Injun?"

Hartigan didn't like the professor, and was at little pains to conceal the fact. Nevertheless he slowly crossed the dusty little street and came to a halt before the plank platform upon which the fat man was sitting. Professor Medill surveyed the broad-shouldered young fellow out of close-set, piggy eyes of muddy brown, and waited.

"I'll take the Indian that wins the race," Hartigan said, looking the other straight in the eye. "And no other."

The fat man chuckled. "You can't take any other," he pointed out triumphantly. "That's th' law of th' pueblo. An' there's jest one Injun that kin win this race; see? Salizar—"

"If the law of the pueblo says that only the winner of the race will be released for outside work, what's the use of dickering with anybody before it comes off?" interrupted the younger man. He spoke a trifle warmly. "How can you, or anybody else, tell beforehand who the winner will be?"

The professor chuckled again. Then his face straightened into lines that might have been interpreted as sinister. He lifted a pudgy forefinger.

"Listen here," he said. "You ain't come right out and admitted what you're here for; but I *know.* I wasn't born yesterday. You're here to git an Injun that kin win th' next interscholastic track meet, back east, by beatin' that Injun Thorne."

He paused, and the other made no comment.

"You ain't th' first college scout to git th' same idea," the professor continued. "There's been others. But I'm here to tell you that nobody kin git Ramon Salizar away from Taos until I give th' word. Th' one that lands him has got to deal with Professor Job Medill. Git that?"

He tapped himself on the breast with a thick thumb. Still the scout was silent. There was contempt in his gaze; if the fat man sensed it, he gave no sign.

"Maybe you're wonderin' how it happens that I've got so much to say," he said. "Well, I'll tell you. I'm the ward boss in Injun politics around here; that's how. Ask anybody in Taos. What I say goes. An' Ramon Salizar, who's won th' annual race for th' last four years, goes to th' college that pays me my price. Don't fool yourself, young feller. It won't pay you."

HE HAD leaned forward to emphasize his declaration. Now he settled back with the air of a man who has delivered an inescapable ultimatum, resting his pudgy hands on his thick knees. The scout had been rolling a cigaret. He lighted it and tossed the match to the dust of the street.

"You're taking a lot for granted, seems to me," he remarked, blowing smoke out of his nose. "I haven't said I'm in the market for your runner, have I?"

"That's right, you ain't. But I wasn't born yesterday. I make it my business to keep track o' things. I know all about this Injun Thorne. He made the 440-yard run in forty-eight an' nine, last year. Last San Geronimo Day my boy Salizar made his quarter-mile in forty-seven flat. How does that strike you, young feller?"

Hartigan smiled skeptically.

"A stop-watch might tell a different story," he said. The fat man pulled a watch from his pocket and dangled it before the other's eyes. It was a stop-watch of the latest design.

"I ain't exactly a fool," he boasted. "When I time a runner, I time him right. This Salizar kin outrun anything on human legs, anywhere, any *time*. Put him up against Thorne, an' he'll make him look foolish." He grinned in triumph. "The college that gits Ramon Salizar," he added, "will have all th' honors at th' next track an' field meet."

An Indian, swathed from head to foot in a surprisingly clean white sheet, rode past on a long-haired pony. A cloud of dust rose from under the shuffling hoofs of the beast. Across the street, partly screened by drooping cottonwood trees, an ancient adobe house peeped forth. The old mud town was fairly baking in the hot rays of the sun. From the plaza, a block away, came the discordant blare of band practise. The band had, as usual, been imported from Santa Fé for the forthcoming celebration.

The fat man's complaisance appeared to nettle the college scout. He removed the cigaret from his lips and flipped off the ash with his little finger. He had remained standing.

"I happen to know," he said distinctly, "that your claim for Salizar's superiority as a runner is disputed. There's a chance that another Indian may win the race. I'd be a fool to deal in advance for the services of a man who may lose, wouldn't I?"

Professor Medill's smile disappeared under a heavy scowl that beetled his brows.

"I know th' Injun you're talkin' about. It's Louis Castallano; that's who it is. Every year he puts up a howl to th' judges, claimin' th' race. That's all th' good it does him. I s'pose you've been hearin' him rave, ain't you?"

"I've heard—about him."

The fat man leaned forward again, the pudgy forefinger in evidence.

"Now, you listen to me. This Castallano ain't got a chance; see? Salizar's a better man, for one thing. An' he's th' son of th' *principal*, for another. Th' *principal* controls th' judges, an' I control th' *principal*. Now do you see where you're barkin' up th' wrong tree?"

"I see," said the scout, with a peculiar light in his gray eyes. "You state the situation pretty plainly, don't you?"

"Just ward politics," the professor grinned. His round face changed its expressions kaleidoscopically, his moods apparently coming and going with the speed of clouds on a mountain peak. "No reform element to interfere, you see. I've lived among these Injuns a good many years, an' I know 'em." He paused in his fanning. "When I come here, thirty years ago, things was different. Th' Injuns had some queer ideas. They—"

He chuckled at the recollection.

"WHY," he went on, "they used to make th' runners in th' annual race decorate themselves with eagle down, to make 'em run faster. That's how simple they was; see? Th' young bucks would climb th' mountains an' th' cliffs to where th' eagles' nests was, lookin' for th' down. If they was lucky enough to git to th' nests without gettin' killed, they'd have to fight th' eagles. A lot more of 'em got killed that way." The fat man tapped himself on the chest again. "I changed all that," he added.

"How?"

"I got 'em to use rabbit fur instead of th' eagle down. They have an annual rabbit hunt, you know."

A sudden gleam had come into the scout's eyes, but the professor was too absorbed in his recital to notice it.

"I don't exactly get the idea," the scout said. The fat man chuckled comfortably.

"Didn't think you would. Not many do. But I use my head, young feller. That's why I've got these Injuns where I want 'em. I've read up on their traditions, an' I've got a lot more straight from th' Injuns themselves. They trust me; see? I—what do you want?"

He had broken off to address the query to a blanketed Indian youth who had mounted the platform silently, his moccasined feet making no sign. The Indian's swarthy face was entirely framed by the blanket, caught under the chin, and his beady little eyes were fixed on the white man.

He spoke in guttural Spanish, and the fat man answered in the same tongue. The Indian nodded, turned and departed as silently as he came.

"Says his squaw's sick," the professor explained. "I'm their medicine man, you see." He had resumed his fanning. "Anyhow, I got th' Injuns to use rabbit fur instead of eagle down. Accordin' to their tradition they thought th' down would give 'em speed, like th' eagle; see? They're mighty superstitious that way. But I showed 'em that if they *all* used rabbit fur, which was easier to git, none of 'em would have any advantage over any of the others. Git th' idea? So now they all decorate themselves with rabbit fur, an' everybody's happy."

"But—what did you care which they used?" The scout was drawing the other gently on, for some reason. It was evident that where opportunity offered to display his own prowess, the fat man was pridefully loquacious. The query brought the explanation promptly.

"Injuns are good farmers if they're handled right. They sell their produce to me; see? I pay 'em cash, an' make my profit." The piggy eyes were almost lost in the self-satisfied grin the fat man wore. "It stands to reason, don't it, that th' more' able-bodied Injuns there is to work, th' more crops are raised? There ain't no profit in havin' a lotta young Injuns go out an' git themselves killed, every year, huntin' for eagle down. See?"

He winked heavily. Then the grin gave place to a scowl again.

"I'm tellin' you all this, young feller, to show you how I stand around here," he said. "These Injuns'll do anything I tell 'em to. I'm a sort of a god to 'em. Anybody with a teaspoonful o' brains kin see it. Ramon Salizar will win that race, an' you can't have him without dealin' with me. Is it plain enough to you now?"

The scout appeared to be impressed at last.

"You've got things about where you want them, all right," he agreed slowly.

"That's right," the professor said eagerly. He swallowed. "Now you're actin' sensible. I've got th' man that kin win all th' honors for your college. An' I'm a reasonable man when it comes to a deal."

"I see. What will it cost me to get Salizar?"

A crafty light sprang into the other's piggy eyes. He affected to consider.

"Th' Injun that kin beat Thorne oughta be worth fifty thousand dollars to any college that gits him," he said. "This Salizar is good for years yet. He's tough as rawhide, an' he's young. What's more, he's smart." He paused and surveyed the scout speculatively. "An' all I'm asking you," he said impressively, "is five thousand dollars."

HARTIGAN tossed his cigaret away and prepared to depart. His face had suddenly grown cold and hard. His gray eyes bored into the piggy orbs of the bribe seeker and held them.

"I'm not buying any talent," he said quietly.

"Then you ain't gettin' any—around here!" roared the disappointed professor, springing to his feet. "I'm tellin' you that!"

The scout thrust his face close to the other's fat countenance. His chin protruded, and his jaw was hard.

"Get this straight," he said. "You may control the *principal*, the judges and perhaps a good part of the population of Taos. I have little doubt of it. But it happens that just now you're talking to somebody that doesn't deal in bribery. Can you understand that there are decent people on earth, you cheap, four-flushing crook?"

He thrust his chin still closer.

"If I take one of these Indians back with me," he said, "it will be one who is a clean sportsman, inside and out, instead of a cheap tool for a cheap political grafter. Anywhere else but here you'd be living in a penitentiary, where you belong. Does that sink into your head, *Professor* Medill?"

The scout was breathing hard, and the professor was wheezing with rage. A cowboy galloped up the street, raising a thick dust, raking his pony with his rowels. The blare of the band was becoming louder. A covered wagon, the newness of whose canvas betrayed the fact that it was to take part in the next day's parade, lumbered past. Professor Medill regained his power of speech with difficulty. Then he snorted, for all the world like an indignant hippopotamus.

"I'm th' biggest man in this town!" he roared. "You hadn't better git gay with me, young feller!"

"If you were anything but an oversized jelly-fish I'd punch you in the jaw," the scout told him. "That's what I think of you."

"You try it!" invited the other, stepping back nevertheless. "You'll find it ain't healthy to take liberties with Job Medill in this part of the country. You—"

But the scout, with a grunt of contempt, had turned and was striding through the dust to the opposite side of the street. The passage at arms had passed almost unnoticed, only a few indolent Mexicans being within earshot. The scout repaired to the sun-baked plaza, scarcely a stone's throw from the professor's adobe dwelling, and sought out a bronzed youth lounging in the shade of one of the buildings. A battered flivver stood at what would have been the curb, had the plaza possessed such a thing.

"Drive me out to the pueblo, and make it snappy," the college man directed.

The bronzed youth came to life with a jerk.

"Sure thing!"

In two minutes the little flivver was flying along the dusty road leading southward, headed toward the ancient Indian pueblo that basked in the sun three miles away. It disappeared, presently, engulfed by the tall willows that fringed the pueblo road the greater part of the distance. The willows were waving in a breeze that suddenly became cool when it struck them.

II

IT WAS early, and the sun was scarcely out of its eastern bed as yet. A pair of primitive human figures were under the big cottonwood just outside the pueblo wall, so close together that even a casual observer would instantly have concluded that they were staging a tryst; for one of the figures was that of a stalwart young Tewa Indian man, the other that of a girl.

She wore a mantle over her head, caught under her chin in the Tewa fashion. She was small and lithe, and the man gazed at her comeliness with eyes strangely expressive, for an Indian. Ten feet from the base of the giant cottonwood the little river flowed on its way to the worn-down adobe wall of the pueblo, under which it disappeared.

The young Indian was tall and noticeably fine looking. The girl was barefooted. At her feet stood an earthen jar, thus far empty of water. The man's feet were encased in beaded moccasins, his form clad in a white sheet as spotless as the snow that gleamed on the slopes of Taos Peak.

They were conversing in low tones when there was a sudden interruption. Around a corner of the pueblo wall came another Indian youth. At sight of the pair he paused a moment; then, with an exclamation in Spanish, he strode down to the edge of the creek and addressed them angrily. Like the first young Indian, he was tall and lithe, and dressed in a white sheet caught under his chin. What pulchritude of countenance he possessed was overshadowed by the expression of rage that twisted his lips in a snarl and brought his brows together in a scowl.

"So!" he said, pausing on the bank. He was addressing the girl. "I find you here, as I expected, talking with a nobody. Is it that you have no shame?"

The girl had shrunk back against the big trunk, and now regarded him with frightened eyes. Her companion stepped in front of her.

"Anything you have to say you will say to me, Ramon," he said quietly, also in Spanish.

"And why should I talk to you?" The tone of the other was arrogant. "Am I not the son of the *principal?* And is not Marie pledged to me? Who are you, but a nameless one who dares to inflict his presence upon those—"

"I am Louis Castallano, as good a man as Ramon Salizar," the other interrupted sternly. "And the little Marie will marry me when I have won the race today."

The statement appeared to convulse the newcomer with rage. A second only he stood on the bank; then, with a cry, he leaped into the stream, casting his white sheet from him as he splashed across, revealing that under the covering he was naked save for a waist cloth of dark calico. In scarcely more than an instant he was confronting his rival, whose large eyes had suddenly become small and glittering.

Quick as Salizar's movement had been, Castallano had divested himself of his own sheet, and stood forth as innocent of encumbering raiment as the other. The girl, after one timid cry, had crouched at the foot of the tree, watching. There was to be battle between these two for possession of her. It was well; from time immemorial the men of the tribe had fought for their women, and fought well. A certain pride mingled in her eyes with the trepidation the imminence of the strife had brought there.

BOTH contestants were weaponless, save for their hands. Their muscles rippled under their brown skins like strands of rope. As they faced each other Louis Castallano spoke.

"Hear me, Ramon Salizar. The woman is mine; she has said so. To fight is foolish. It is better that you go away and leave us alone."

"She is mine!" Salizar retorted angrily. "Has not her father declared it? Has he not publicly proclaimed that she is to go to the winner of the race today?"

"That is true," Castallano assented grimly. "But the race has not yet been run. And no one knows who will win it."

Salizar laughed, showing rows of straight, strong teeth as white as the sheet he had cast into the stream.

"For four years I have won this race," he said. "My father, the *principal*, has decreed that I shall win it today. Have my legs lost their swiftness? Or has the wind gone out of my breast?" He struck the latter proudly. "Therefore, Louis Castallano, you are an interloper. The little Marie cannot pledge herself; she has not the right. She goes to me, Ramon Salizar, who will win the race as before!"

"She will marry me."

The two bronze bodies came together on the instant. Salizar had launched himself at his antagonist with silent ferocity. But Castallano, his eyes gleaming through their slits, caught the blow of the other's fist on his forearm, and stepped swiftly aside, causing Salizar to plunge to the ground almost at the feet of the crouching girl. He was on his feet like a cat, however, and circling around the first Indian. They sparred like a pair of boxers—as, indeed, they were. The government has seen to it that its wards have this kind of training where they show aptitude for it.

But the battle, after all, was destined to be short. Salizar was fairly trembling with rage, which is not good for one who fights a fistic duel. At the second onslaught his rival caught him a powerful blow on the chin, and he went backward into the creek, gurgling. The water was shallow, but he would have drowned had not Castallano sprung after him and dragged him clear. It was two minutes before the defeated man had been restored to his normal self.

Then he stood up, shook his head to clear it of the fumes, and glared at the victor.

"Today," he snarled, "I will again win the race. And my father, the *principal*, will see to it that the woman is given to me. Moreover, you shall be punished for this work; do you understand?"

"The race," said Louis Castallano quietly, "will be won by him who runs the fastest. It is the law of the pueblo. And well you know that I was the real winner last year. Only because the judges—"

"The judges will decide as my father, the *principal*, tells them they must!" cried Salizar hotly.

"Not if one of us is far ahead of the other," corrected Castallano. "For then all may see who is the winner."

Salizar sneered. "For four years," he said, "we have come in so close together that there was not the width of an aspen twig between us. It will be so this year. And the judges will make their decision as my father, the *principal*—"

But the other had seized him by the arm and was pushing him in the direction of the adobe wall. "Go," he commanded wearily. "I am tired of hearing about your father, the *principal*. Let your legs talk for you in this matter. Your tongue needs rest."

THE rival disappeared over the wall, muttering evilly as he departed. The girl, wide-eyed, rose from her recumbent position at the foot of the great tree, and regarded her handsome lover adoringly.

"He does not know, that Ramon," she told him, smiling up into his eyes. "There is much which he must learn; is it not so?" She giggled suddenly. "How great will be his surprise, when you cross the evergreen so far ahead of him that even a jack-rabbit could not span the gap. What will he say, Louis?"

"He will have to say, with the judges and his father, the *principal*, that another has beaten him fairly," the young Indian responded grimly. He looked at her fondly. "And then you and I, Marie, will go forth with the white man to the great white man's college. I will study the white man's language and laws. Has he, the white man, not promised it?"

"If you win the great race," she reminded, with a woman's caution.

"I shall win it. Has not the white man shown me the way?"

"It is so." She nestled to him a moment. The cry of an automobile horn sounded in the distance. They sprang apart, and Marie stooped quickly to fill the earthen jar with the water of the creek. The man recovered his white sheet and wrapped it around him. He crossed the shallow waters of the stream and emerged on the other side, his moccasins wet, his shanks dripping.

"Tomorrow," he called softly, "we will be married."

At the same moment Ramon Salizar, in the kiva of the *principal*, was launching forth on the tale of his nearest rival's recent activities. "He seems strangely certain that he will win the race today," he said darkly. "Tell me, my father, why is this?"

The *principal*, a wrinkled Indian with streaks of gray in his coarse black hair and the craft of his race in his little eyes, showed his yellow snags in a laugh.

"I know not," he returned, "except that the youth has been overtaken by his foolishness."

III

THE annual pilgrimage to the Taos pueblo relay races reached its crest long before the sun had reached the meridian.

Two roads lead to it, the incredibly ancient Indian dwelling place whose government was a democracy before Switzerland was even dreamed of. One of them curves widely to the eastward, skirting a field of willows and paralleling the little river that sparkles in the New Mexico October sun. The other one is more direct; but on the morning of the great contest both are inevitably crowded with vehicles of every description, carrying sightseers to the field day exercises that had reached the dignity of a classic when the Greeks were still boasting to their children of the triumphs of the Olympiad.

On this particular morning flivvers and lordly, dust-laden touring cars followed each other down the two roads. Covered wagons, creaking and high of box, lumbered along ahead of pony-drawn buckboards, and behind two-wheeled Mexican carts the replica of others born in the time of the Spanish invader. Cowboys galloped along on their flea-bitten ponies, straight of neck and sloping of rump, detouring around the slower units of the procession whenever a break in the willows offered the chance.

Indians, their swarthy faces peering out from the folds of their sheet blankets, toed in with their moccasined feet and trudged stoically through the deep dust. Three languages predominated in the welter of conversation all along the line, English, Spanish and the staccato gutturals of polyglot Indian.

AT THE left of the once proud gateway to the pueblo stood the little Spanish mission, its tiny belfry gleaming in the sun, its front yard neatly fenced in with freshly painted adobe wall. A railless log bridge carried the vehicles and foot passengers across the little river, which divides the pueblo into two parts. A leafy shrine had been erected before the sprawling communal house on the west bank of the river. Stretching away from the shrine, in which presently would rest the image of the patron saint after whom the day was named, was the historic race track upon which thousands upon thousands of hard brown feet had pattered their way to victory or defeat, in past centuries. It was a quarter of a mile long, hard as packed adobe earth can be.

The crowd surged along the track and around the row of rude split-log booths, erected perhaps before even canvas had been invented. Merchants had taken possession of the booths and were shouting their wares.

"Ice-cream co-o-nes! Ten cents apiece. This way, señors, for your ice-cream co-o-ones! Ten cents—"

"Fine candy, señors! Very fine candy! Big sack for one little dime, señors! Ten cents for one big sack of the good, fine candy—"

"Ice-water, fi' cents a glass. This way for ice-water, señors and señoritas. Do not go thirsty! Ice-water, fi' cents—"

The sun blazed down on the crowd, and the venders of ice-water and ice-cream cones did a thriving business. On the numerous roofs of the big communal house a thousand or more people were gathered to view the race. Here and there, scattered through the throng, brilliant blankets indicated the presence of Indians, dressed in their holiday best. Squaws with legs wrapped in outing flannel until they were half as large as nail kegs scrambled awkwardly up and down the pole ladders, from one level to another. White tourists, screened from the sun with brilliantly colored parasols, paid tribute to small Indian boys for the privilege of negotiating these same ladders. Women squealed with excitement. Dozens of the swarthy-skinned children darted about in the crowd on the ground, their grimy paws spread palm upward, and crying hoarsely:

"Fi' cent, señor! Fi' cent!"

THE race course was being kept clear of spectators by parchment-skinned old Indians, naked save for waistcloths and blankets, who stalked about armed with sprigs of evergreen and shooed off stragglers as a housewife shooes flies. Some of them indulged in guttural pleasantries delivered in their own tongue, mixed with occasional Spanish.

"*Muy caliento!*" one of them shouted at intervals, grinning and exposing rows of yellow snags. "*Muy caliento!*"

"He says it's very hot," a white man remarked to a woman at the edge of the track. "I'll tell the world he's right. Whew!"

People were climbing to the roofs of the split-log booths to view the race. Something of a commotion was caused by a very fat man, whose piggy eyes were set closely to either side of his thick nose, scrambling up a short ladder and forcing his way through the group at the top. Somebody cursed him good-naturedly, and the fat man swore back. He won his way to the edge of the booth, where there was room to sit down and dangle his fat legs overside. The panorama of the track was spread before him.

"Lived among these people thirty years," he wheezed to a youth seated next to him. "Know 'em like a blood. Seen so many of these races they ain't interestin' no more."

From the entrance to the little mission came a group of Indians, brilliantly blanketed, carrying something under a white canopy.

"That's th' image of St. Jerome they're bringin'," the fat man volunteered. "They'll set it up under them leaves at th' head of th' track; see?"

FOLLOWING the image carriers came a double line of middle-aged Indians, dancing to the time of a weird chant. All were clad in new red and green blankets, and carried sprigs of green spruce boughs and yellow aspen. Their coarse black and gray hair shone in the sun from the liberal oiling it had received in honor of this fête day. They danced in perfect synchronism to the pounding of a skin drum, carried by one of their number.

Suddenly a mighty cheer went up from the multitude.

"Here they come!"

The fat man pointed down the track.

"See that gate?" he inquired of the youth at his side. "They're comin' out of there. I've seen this thing so many times I could go through it blindfolded."

From the gate designated a double line of almost naked young Indians was emerging. They wore scanty waistcloths and beaded moccasins; nothing more. From their oiled hair streamed fluttering lengths of red, green and yellow ribbons. Their bodies were smeared thickly with black and brown clay, and a white, downy substance stuck to the skin formed fantastic designs against the nude bodies. The line divided, one heading toward the south end of the track, the other toward the north. In two minutes the runners were divesting themselves of their moccasins, leaving them in piles just back of the starting tapes. Old Indian coaches strode back and forth back of the lines, switching the bare legs of the runners with sprigs of evergreen, uttering admonitions in guttural Tewa.

"What's that stuff they've got streaked all over their bodies?" the youth asked. "Cotton?"

"Why, that's what it looks like," the fat man responded with a wink. "Ask any Injun what it is, an' he'll tell you it's eagle down. But it ain't."

He winked again at the other's inquiring look.

"It *used* to be eagle down, all right. Th' tourist books say it is now. But these Injuns have got wise to themselves; see? That's nothin' but rabbit fur."

"Is that so?" The youth was politely interested. His attention was riveted on the waiting line of runners. "What's the idea of the eagle down—or the rabbit fur?"

"Well, in th' old days Injuns' medicine men told 'em that th' eagle down would make 'em run fast, like the eagle flies; see?" The fat man chuckled. "But I convinced 'em that rabbits kin run fast enough for all ordinary purposes; so now they use fur instead. I been livin' among these Injuns a long time—"

A sudden roar drowned out the rest of his utterance.

"They're off!"

IT WAS the white spectators that voiced the age-old race-track cry. The Indians merely yelled in varying trebles, and began to dance with excitement. Two runners had been released from one of the waiting lines, springing out and away like thorough-bred race horses, their arms held close to their sides, their trim legs reaching out in front of them, the bright-colored ribbons streaming out behind. Neck and neck they plunged down the course, between the lines of cheering spectators. Presently there was a yell from the other end.

"They've crossed the tape," the fat man explained. "Their two reliefs have started back. Here they come!"

As the race proceeded the excitement mounted, despite the fearful heat. Pair after pair of the racers dashed up and down the track, relieved by other pairs the instant they had crossed the tapes, made of evergreen boughs strung across the course. As the day wore on the runners, toughened as they were by long weeks of rigorous training, began to show the strain. Attendants dashed buckets of water over them. Others rubbed their feet, now rapidly getting sore. Now and then a runner collapsed entirely and was carried unceremoniously off the track and out of sight. The lines of contestants were thinning out. All the time the shrilling yells of the Indians kept up incessantly, although the white spectators had subsided save for occasional bursts of cheering.

"How long will they keep this up?" the youth asked the fat man presently.

"They're pretty near through now," the fat man answered. "About time for th' two head runners to come out. Th' champion, you know, an' th' runner up. They'll run off the finals in one round trip—from this end to the other, an' back again. That's th' way they do. I've been—"

AGAIN his utterance was drowned out by a sudden roar from the crowd.

"There they come, now," he shouted into the youth's ear, pointing. "That's them—Salizar an' Castallano."

The stars had emerged from the gate in the wall and were trotting soberly, side by side, up the track toward the leafy shrine. The shrill yelling of the Indians redoubled in volume. The runners were superb specimens of bronzed manhood, their muscles rippling under their skins, their shoulders bulging with evidence of their strength. That they were trained to the minute was evident.

A hush descended as the runners took their places on the tape and awaited the word to go. Behind each one an Indian coach had taken his position, sprig of evergreen poised. The fat man dragged a stop-watch from his pocket and held it in readiness. For the first time he was showing traces of excitement.

"Now you'll see some runnin'," he remarked out of the side of his mouth. "That Injun on this side'll win. He always does."

The youth looked at his companion.

"That's no sign he will this time," he declared, with young America's recognition of the elements of chance.

"You wait an' see. I've been livin' among these Injuns a long time, an—"

"They're off!"

THE two head runners were off down the course like a pair of painted streaks. Salizar was daubed in brown, Castallano in black. Both were smeared with the feathery substance remarked by the young tourist, traced in bewildering designs. The substance fluttered in the wind, and the ribbons worn by the pair streamed out straight behind. Runners in ancient Greece could have deserved no more praise than these two dusky sons of an ancient race for their performance.

The fat man had struggled to his feet, and was following the flying forms with a pair of binoculars glued to his piggy eyes. Down below, unnoticed by him, a broad shouldered young man was following his example. A burst of cheering told that the racers had arrived at the other end and were starting on the return trip. The youth on the roof of the booth came to his own feet in time to hear a startled oath from the fat man's lips.

"Hell's fire!" that individual was howling. "What th' hell's th' matter with him?"

He said other things; but his plaint was lost in the tremendous volume of sound that rose from the thousands of throats. Raucous blasts of automobile horns added to the din. Two hundred cowboys, grouped about an old wall that ended about midway of the course, threw their hats into the air and added their excited "yip! yip!" to the bedlam. A man standing at the edge of one of the roofs on the communal house suddenly lost his balance and plunged to the level below, without attracting any notice.

The fat man's wail penetrated the fearful noise like the screech of a fire siren.

"Run, damn you, run!"

IN A moment the cause of his wail was apparent. One of the figures, tearing up the track, had drawn an incredible distance ahead of the other one. The winning runner was the one smeared in black. The one in brown was already fully fifty feet behind, and apparently losing ground with every jump.

The fat man uttered expletives that did credit to his powers of invention.

"You blankety-blanked, blankety-blanked son of a blankety-blank!" he shouted, dancing from one foot to the other, his eyeballs almost starting from their sockets. His tone became agonized. "You lop-eared, cross-eyed, knock-kneed imitation of an Injun! You—"

"Looks like your man is falling behind," the youth at his side suggested, putting his mouth close to the fat man's ear.

"You blankety-blank—"

But further verbal acrobatics were useless. The fat man stopped in the middle of an expletive and began to forge his way through the crowd on the roof, making for the ladder. The runner in black had crossed the tape, with his rival more than sixty-five feet behind him, and was already surrounded by excited Indians whose shrill yells attested their satisfaction with the outcome.

"Let me down there!" roared the fat man. "I gotta git to them judges, quick."

He ploughed through the crowd around the successful racer like a Mississippi River steamboat going upstream, puffing with his exertion. The line of Indians around Louis Castallano made way for him, grinning. The judges were seated in a circle under the leafy shrine, their beady eyes alight, their hair done up in rabbit skins, their blankets drawn circumspectly about their skinny shoulders. They were among the oldest men in the tribe.

Behind the fat man came two other men—one of them the college scout, Hartigan, the other a trim captain of the United States Army. The Stars and Stripes were floating from a pole erected on one of the split-log booths, an emblem of authority.

The fat man arrived first. A torrent of Spanish was falling from his lips, directed at the circle of Indian judges.

Hartigan fell back as he was unceremoniously elbowed aside by the army captain, who grasped the fat man by the arm. It was a part of the army officer's business to understand Spanish, it appeared.

"Nothing doing, Professor," he said crisply. "I heard you. These judges can rule only one way, under the circumstances. Castallano wins by a mile."

The professor opened his mouth to say something, and thought better of it. On his way out of the crowd he encountered Hartigan, and snarled at him. Castallano was standing close by, and a brown-eyed little Indian maiden was standing at his side, smiling adoringly up into his painted face.

"Somethin' must 'a' bewitched that Injun, to run like that!" Professor Medill declared aggressively. "Shouldn't wonder but what somebody slipped him some dope, or somethin'."

"Meaning me?" inquired Hartigan coolly.

"If th' shoe fits, wear it!"

BUT the college man only grinned. He could afford to be magnanimous. The stop-watch in his hand told a story of future triumphs for the college he represented, and the marvelous Castallano.

"Why, you might call it that," he acknowledged. "I heard somewhere that Castallano was out hunting eagles' nests in Cimmaron Cañon, several days ago."

The professor looked at him, mouth agape. Slowly the significance of the information began to filter in. His anger flared redly.

"I s'pose you call that *clean* sport!" he sneered. "Takin' advantage o' what I told you about Injun superstition, an' all. No wonder that Injun beat every record that's been hung up at this track. You played me a dirty trick, young feller."

"Maybe I did," grinned the scout. "You ought to make more of a study of Indian psychology, Professor, and less of ward politics. Castallano simply outran your man, on the theory that since he was wearing eagle feathers, and the other fellow nothing but rabbit fur, it would be impossible for him to lose."

But Louis Castallano, alone that night with his dusky light o' love, revealed the real reason for his victory.

"The white man thought the eagle down would give me the speed of the eagle, little Marie," he said as they kept a tryst under the cottonwood by the little river. "But he was wrong."

"How?" asked the girl.

"It was your promise to marry me that gave me wings," he told her.

Everybody's Meeting Place

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

ARE readers getting tired of Western stories? I'm wondering. When, not very long ago, I was made editor of EVERYBODY'S, I realized I was the most inexperienced editor in the world and very eagerly I looked about for guidance and suggestion. One thing that was told me was that Western stories were sure-fire. "You can't go wrong on Westerns!" said an old hand at this business of being an editor.

But before much time had passed, I began to receive letters like this one from H. T. of Pittsburgh.

> **I wish to thank you for publishing a red-blooded, fiction magazine that is not wholly given over to "westerns" but contains a wide variety of stories to suit *all* tastes.**
>
> **I'm an old hand at the reading game; and I was reading EVERYBODY'S before Lawson bought it.**
>
> **It was pretty good then but you have made it better. At least my friends think so and so do I.**
>
> **You start off well with not too many "westerns." Honestly, just because *The Rider of the Purple Sage* made a big hit because the reading public was tired of society fiction, editors have surfeited their readers with cowboy stuff until the literary stomach revolts.**
>
> **We need a change of literary diet.**

And like this from H. McD., also of Pittsburgh.

> **I note with pleasure that you are not limiting your readers to any one type of story. Some of my friends are absolutely saturated with cowboy stories. "A little is good!" they say, "but we want a change."**

And still again this comment from a Californian:

> **Why the very ordinary Western stories you publish? It seems as though every magazine must cater to some large part of the reading public who insist on stories of this type. In my opinion, they get mighty tiresome.**

Yet on the other hand, there are always two sides to a question. Otherwise how do you explain the point of view of one reader who wrote in to say *War Along Big Creek* in the February issue was one of the best stories she had ever read?

But I certainly would like to hear from more readers on this subject.

Perhaps the answer is that people are tired of the usual Western stories of a conventional pattern, filled to overflowing with gun play and bloodshed.

WESTERNS IN THIS ISSUE

MEANWHILE, we're sticking somewhat to our guns and you'll find four stories in this issue that have, at least, a Western background.

Two of them, however, are very far away from the conventional Western tales.

When an Injun Runs, by Albert William Stone, you'll soon discover, has nothing to do with either gunplay or cowboys and while *Devil-Tails* by Anthony Rud has, its rowdy humor sets it apart from the usual Western story.

TALES OF WESTRALIA

JUMPING to the other end of the world, we introduce with enthusiasm a new writer, Louis Kaye, with his story of the Australian desert, *Off the Trail*. Kaye had has a varied career. He writes:

> I went into the bush when I was eleven and worked for less than a dollar a week; in the course of seven years I held down jobs on Westralian stations and saw a bit of South Australia, so I think I can get my stuff pretty authentic. Some other things I've been, by the way—a trimmer on a coal burner, a miner, a kind of able seaman on a schooner, a garage hand, an advertising man, an advance agent for a theatrical show and a traveling salesman.
>
> It might seem that I'm trying to fit Western stories onto an Australian setting. South Africa seems to me to have a type of story all its own and so does South America. But if you write a story of Westralia true to local color, it'll run very close in type to Western America stories. I don't suppose there's anywhere in the world today a country so like the American West of thirty or forty years ago as is Westralia. And life on a big cattle or sheep station is much like life used to be on American ranches, seemingly. A chap I worked with on a station hailed from Arkansas and sampled ranch life in Texas and Montana some twenty years ago, and he told me he fancied he was back there sometimes. The names of things are different, but that's about all.

There we're back on the West! There seems to be no escaping it.

THE AIR AGAIN!

ONE of the best liked stories in the February EVERYBODY'S, judging from what readers said, was *Metal Props*, by Billy Parker, the first story that this experienced flying man ever wrote.

This month we present another flying story by another man who has had far greater experience in flying than in writing although *For the Good of the Service* is by no means Captain Jack Yeaman's first story.

Captain Yeaman intimates that his own life has been very tame. Just listen to it:

> I have written very little fiction, as you guessed. Only really started this year and just beginning to get under way. I do write a lot of articles, however, and am having a little success now in that line.
>
> Don't know what to say for "Everybody's Meeting Place." My life has been a wish for and a search for that illusive damsel called Adventure. She's still around the corner and all I've managed to catch of her is a whiff of the sense stirring perfume which has lured so many men to the far places.
>
> At seventeen I joined the Royal Flying Corps in Canada, received my commission a few months later and flew for the British for eighteen interesting months overseas. Adventure? Not the intriguing kind you read about.
>
> After armistice I turned down an offer from the Polish government to chase Bolsheviks through the air and wandered about the continent a bit. Then back home to the U. S. A.
>
> The boom oil towns of Oklahoma next. Roaring mud holes reeking with the odor of sweat and corn liquor. Bossed a gang of over a hundred of the hardest-boiled pipe liners when twenty. Learned about pay day working gamblers and I.W.Ws. from them. But still no excitement. The gamblers left me alone and the I.W.Ws. cut up a few of my friends on the job when I kicked them out of camp but never touched me—and I'm a skinny hombre who should be soft pickings for huskies with long knives and hair-trigger Colts.
>
> Back to New York for a fling at advertising. Good training with one of the best agencies. Two years of it. But the sight of the mob at Broadway and Wall during the lunch hour—eating to work and working to eat—sickened me and I joined a friend in Texas three years ago.
>
> Flying again. National Guard stuff and Reserves. But got in more than the average. Traveling and writing for newspapers mostly. In Mexico about half the time these days. To Yucatan. Across the desert of the southern district of Lower California to Magdalena Bay—place of mysteries and rumors. Looking for tens of thousands of Japanese settlers. Found two old Jap fishermen. More bunk! Down the Mexican West Coast, into out-of-the-way spots.
>
> That brings me up to now, when, at twenty-seven, I'm still looking for adventure and not finding it. There are fights and people are killed either two days before I arrive or two days after I leave a place. Seldom when I am there. Revolutions dissolve at my approach. Rumor proves groundless. Mystery becomes commonplace. Intrigue turns into above board business negotiations. Mexico boils fiercely with possibilities of—anything! And nothing happens. People exclaim, "How terribly dangerous it must be to go into those places in Mexico where Americans almost never go and where such frightful things happen!" And down there I receive only delightful courtesy and consideration while my friends in the big cities in the States dodge death in a hundred sudden forms.
>
> Guess I'm too darned simple for adventure. In 1919 an old Arab fortune-teller told me that I would live always in the home of danger and death but they would never touch me, and that I would die peaceably in bed at an old age. Horrible prospect.
>
> As for the story *For the Good of the Service*, it is based on real happenings. Things like that *do* take place in this border country of ours more than the other parts of the country realize. Between liquor, dope and Chinamen there's a lot of smuggling there. Chinks bring $500 a head and there are a few so-called commercial flyers who've made nice stakes

doing the dirty work. Dope comes across in a thousand ways—usually in driblets. One enterprising gent shipped it across in the innards of live rattlesnakes. The snakes, naturally, were not closely examined and the ruse wasn't discovered for some time. And so it goes.

But I never have the good luck to be flung into the thick of any of the excitement myself.

ALSO PRESENT

THERE are other writers new to the new Everybody's that we'd like to talk about if space permitted.

We are particularly proud to lead off this issue with a story by Hugh Pendexter whose work is so well known in *Adventure* and other magazines. Mr. Pendexter has also sent us other stories which we shall publish in early issues.

Then there is Ared White's new character creation, *O'Vane*, whose egotistical adventures we hope to continue. In fact, we have another *O'Vane* story scheduled for June.

And there is H. M. Sutherland making his bow in Everybody's with *Black Men and Ivory*.

There's a story I, at least, enjoyed! And we have more stories coming from Sutherland. I asked him to write a word of greeting for all of us and here it is:

> May a Virginia hillman say "Howdy!" to the habitués of "Everybody's Meeting Place"?
>
> A certain metropolitan critic recently stated that all of us who have a yen to yarn love to talk about ourselves. Perhaps he is right—so here goes!
>
> Aged thirty-two, unwed, a natural liar, and no gentleman (I emphatically prefer brunettes), formerly a newspaperman in various and sundry places including New York, varied occasionally by other enterprises, running the gamut from selling the Lives of the Saints to tending bar—back in the days when those things were in demand.
>
> My adventuring now is limited largely to the realms of fancy, this being due to the fact that I am a disabled veteran of the late, lamented World War. Although forced to curtail my nomadic bent, my dreams have no handicap, and fancy seeks the unmapped trails—those I would be traveling if I could stand the gaff. A letter, a card, from those who do journey along the byways of the world, would do nicely.
>
> My latchstring is out, here along the Kentucky-Virginia border, and I can guarantee the bag limit of quail and pheasant to any of you, and, if necessary, a moonshine still can be located—one of the old backin'-an'-doublin' kind from whence comes the beaded brandy that made the mint julip a national regret.

ON THEIR WAY

AS I write this, I have at my elbow the list of stories ready for the next few issues of Everybody's. I really do think I've got some awfully good stuff that will easily help you to forget the routine worries of every day.

Next month, Everybody's begins publication of an enchanting novel of the South Seas called "The Dangerous Isles." It's romantic, colorful and has that come-on quality that leads you breathless from one chapter to the next. And I don't even know who the author is. He—or she—writes under the pseudonym of Basil Carey and refuses to let even an editor enthusiastic about his work know his actual name. If I'd written the story I'd want my name shouted from the housetops!

But there are stories coming from people you do know—Captain Dingle, Hugh Pendexter, Ared White, William Corcoran, Thomson Burtis, and others.

And there's also a novelette of South Africa about crocodiles and Kaffir kings and danger written by a man who was for years a next door neighbor of the Kaffirs. I'm going to rush this into the earliest possible issue for I know you'll like it because it's so genuine as well as so exciting.

PROGRESS

IT'S a great life, I find, editing a magazine like Everybody's. It's great fun drawing your stories from men and women who are leading adventurous, colorful lives in all parts of the world.

But it's the greatest satisfaction of all when some reader writes in to tell us we're doing a pretty good job although I realize perfectly well the new Everybody's is just about getting started on its way. Yet, I'm told it's selling on the newsstands better than it has in a long, long while. There's certainly a kick in knowing that.

Write in and tell me frankly your reactions, favorable or unfavorable—and don't forget to let me have your opinion about Westerns. O. G.

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONTH

The Dangerous Isles

The beginning of a new romance filled with all the perilous enchantment of the South Seas

By BASIL CAREY

Two Complete *Novelettes*

O'Vane's Epa'lettes

By AREd WHITE

Another adventure of the irrepressible O'Vane who first salutes you in this issue. O'Vane now joins the retinue of a king, believe it or not, at a tremendous salary—or, at least, he thinks it tremendous.

It Ain't Right

By FREDERICK JACKSON

Introducing one of the most lovable characters you've ever encountered, an old sea captain with domestic difficulties but whose greatest worry is that he has to give up sail for steam. Plenty of action, too.

And Among the Short Stories

Another story of adventure by *H. M. Sutherland;* another story of the East by *L. G. Blochman;* another stirring tale of the West by *William Corcoran;* and a howling story (howling is right!) of a cowboy and a toothache by *Hurnard Dent.*